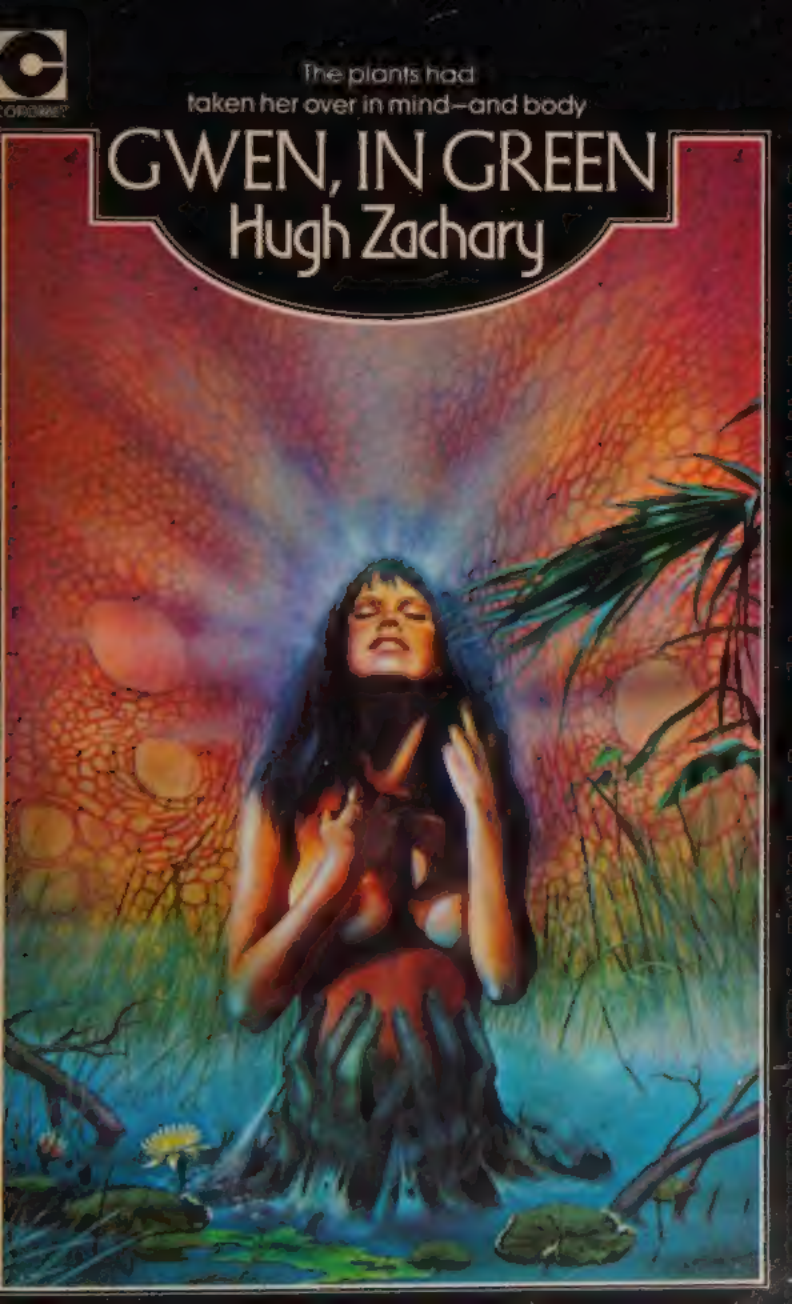
The plants had
taken her over in mind—and body

GWEN, IN GREEN

Hugh Zachary



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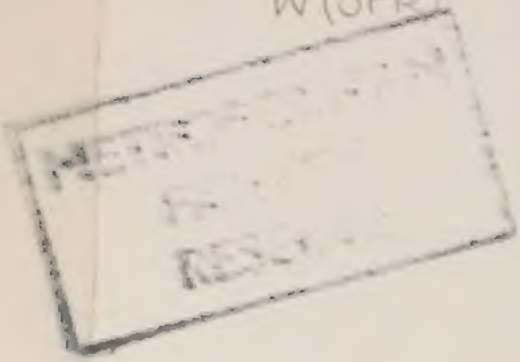

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WEN, IN GREEN

The stranger was hurt. Badly.

He just lay there in the mud looking up at the pretty young woman.

"Who are you?" she asked, looking at him closely, noting the cuts, the blood, the trailing, twisted arm, his weakness.

"Does that matter?"

"Yes," she said. "Are you the boss?"

"Yeah. Listen, I'm beginning to hurt. Will you please go get some of my men?"

"No," she said. "I'm going to watch you die."

Gwen, in Green

Hugh Zachary

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For May
who planted the seed

1

She knew about being ugly and unloved. The knowledge made her a soft touch for four-legged beggars and created a housing problem in a small development home of two bedrooms, one bath, combination kitchen and dining room, and a small living room. With the house a way-station for appealing strays, she skimped on grocery money to pay for mange treatments for a cowed mongrel pup and often passed up her own milk to nourish transient tomcats and the house regular, a great, black ex-tom named Satan. She hoarded every table scrap for the two outside dogs, Sam, a happy, funny part-Airedale, and Mandy, a doleful part hound. In return, the animals loved her immediately, recognizing open, adoring gentleness, and the neighbors fairly generally called her Marsha the Enormous Mother. Although she was childless, her kitchen was open house for kids, with cookies always available on demand. Birds had a permanent feeding station in her back yard. Squirrels spoke to her by first name, barking from the oak trees, and took peanuts from her fingers.

So she was puzzled by the behavior of the ugly animal. His actions, she knew, were quite uncharacteristic.

George and the real estate salesman were ahead of her, pushing through dense second growth brush to the bank of the tidal creek. On a by path she was threading her way along what seemed to be an animal trail when she came upon a small clearing where a moss-air plant had taken advantage of the sun to cover the ground. A rotted, fallen longleaf pine showed its gray skeleton of resin-rich

dead wood which, when split, burned torchlike and made excellent kindling for a fireplace. From the distant shore, across the wide marsh and the Intracoastal Waterway, heavy equipment growled like distant thunder, the low mumble-rumble coming and going on the shifting breeze. In the woods around her birds dug in the leaves and made a dry, crackling sound.

An opossum is a housecat-sized marsupial. What hair it has is dirty, gray, and always seems to be threatening to molt, to leave an even sicker creature bald, graceless, vaguely repulsive. A needle-sharp snout contains a set of fifty sharp, tiny teeth, six more teeth than in the closest competing placental mammal: teeth which gnaw and tear at anything from insects to carrion, teeth which almost never threaten, however, except when shown in a hissing, cringing snarl when the animal is cornered.

"I won't hurt you, fella," Gwen said in the voice she used to cajole squeals of delight from her accepted domestic pets.

The small, dirty gray beast made a zigzagging advance a few staggering steps to the right, a swerving retreat to the left. It faced us as the opossum was between the creature between them. In a sudden hissing sh... the moving sound, saw saliva drop from the white, dead meat mouth opened wide.

The opossum is considered by many to be the leper of the animal world. Not by Gwen. She knew. She had carefully buried a dead beast.

But was she being menaced by this small, usually timid animal?

Perhaps she had stumbled near the animal's den and it was driven to excessive bravery to protect its home and its young. She looked around for a willow tree, saw only low-growing brush and ruddy oaks. The area had been burned over not too many years past. Here and there a fallen log told of once proud, huge trees, but the new growth was young, weedy, gaunt, hot in the sun.

With awkward movements the opossum came closer, hissing wildly now, glaring at her with small, dull eyes. She

backed off a few steps, saying softly, "All right, it's your turf, guy. I'm leaving."

To fend off a foolish, vague sense of threat, she laughed.

Brush closed around her as she left the clearing. The heat of the August afternoon seemed suddenly oppressive. Sweat beaded on her neck, ran down to dampen her blouse. George and the real estate man were out of hearing. She felt very much alone and very much ashamed to be frightened by a small harmless animal, but a noise behind her caused her head to jerk around, sent a stiffening through her body. She turned casually and began to walk back along the twisting animal trail. The opossum began a lumbering run, overtaking her rapidly.

She left her pride behind. Low-hanging branches beat her face. Breathing hard, she veered off the trail and crashed through the brush. She slowed as she heard the voices of the two men, managed to look almost normal as she emerged from the brush onto the damp, black mud of the creek bank. Her slacks had a rip in the leg and there was a scratch on her cheek. George seemed not to notice her agitation. He had broken off a blade of marsh grass from the creek's edge and was chewing it thoughtfully. His coarse blond hair was mussed from walking through the woods. His shirt was darkened by perspiration. He stood with his legs apart. He was a stocky, masculine, handsome man, beautiful in Gwen's eyes. He winked a brown eye at her, chewed his blade of grass, kicked at a fallen log. She laughed to herself. Last week he had chewed a toothpick while kissing the left of a new MG sportster. At her laugh, as if he knew, he grinned at her in that way he had and, as always, it made her feel warm and melty inside.

"So you know the situation," the real estate man was saying. "If it weren't for what those bastard[illegible] planned and looked quickly at Gwen[illegible]are doing you wouldn't touch this piece of land for a fraction of what we're asking."

A crackling in the brush behind her turned Gwen's

head. The opossum had followed her. It came out onto the black mud and paused, swaying, hissing, dripping saliva.

"I'm not saying it will be quiet around here for the next couple of years," the real estate man said. "But if you know the problems and can accept them it's a heluva buy."

"No, Gwen," George said. "I absolutely refuse." It was an old joke between them. The real estate man looked at Gwen blankly, resenting her intrusion into his sales pitch. Gwen giggled nervously at the phrase which was repeated each time she looked pitifully at a stray dog or cat.

The opossum surveyed them, hissed, advanced directly toward Gwen. She moved closer to her husband. "George?"

"Now you're not afraid of a little old 'possum." George said. Not the fearless hunter of lions was present.

"Hey," the real estate man said as the opossum continued to move hissing toward Gwen's legs. He moved rapidly, seizing a heavy branch.

"Careful," Gwen warned, as the animal made a lunge which she avoided by skipping aside.

The real estate man put his shoulder into the blow, breaking the opossum's back. It struggled, its head jerking. He hit it again and again until it was still. Then, he poked it with his stick, turning it over. "Funny," he said, "is it that expression everything?"

"Funny way for a 'possum to act," George said, his arm around a shivering Gwen.

"Rabid, probably," the real estate man said. "Had a couple of rabid foxes earlier."

Gwen shuddered. It was a terrible way to christen their new home site.

2

"George," she said sleepily, her breath hot on his neck, "now that you're rich, will you leave me for some pretty young girl?"

They were in George's lazy position, she sprawled atop, her breasts soft and hot against his chest. He liked to lie that way for a long time.

"Maybe I won't leave you," he said. "Maybe I'll just hire a hot-and-cold-running French maid."

"I'll kill you," she promised.

"You already have," he said, moving his loins. "No life at all left in the poor little beggar."

"Serves him right for being greedy," she said.

"You only complain afterwards," George said.

"That's bragging, not complaining," she said.

The room airconditioner activated its compressor with a whang and a bellow. In the new house there would be a central unit, quiet, efficient.

She tried to concentrate on the new house, envisioning its spacious rooms, trying to see in her mind the view from the balcony: dark, tidal Possum Creek and the wide, gray green marsh.

It was not cool. Where their bare bodies made contact there was a slight stickiness, a damp feeling. Yet, feeling uncomfortable as the fires within her banked and the sex-induced amnesia faded, she reached for the sheet, pulled it over her legs and rounded rump. George sighed, but said nothing.

"It's sinful," she said.

"Humm."

"In bed in the afternoon," she said.

"Delightfully sinful," he said.

At least she could tease about it now. She had made progress in seven years of marriage.

George dozed. He made a funny little buzzing sound in his throat. She was alone. Softened, he was still inside her, but she was alone and, although she had come a long way to be able to lie thus, she still felt more at ease with the sheet over her. Underneath the light covering body heat made for perspiration. And in her mind, underneath the comfortable blanket of her love for George, she felt the old shame grow.

Don't think about it, she told herself.

She thought about it when she was alone or when she was lying with George after sex and he was still away from her, resting, dozing. Then the change came over her and she felt her body tense against his. Although she had been winning the battle for years, the fight was not over. There comes a time in life when one has to accept oneself as one is, when it is no longer possible to feel ashamed. There were times when she thought she had won, finally, but then she would remember, or the memory would begin to pound like an aching tooth and she would hear his voice in her mind:

Gwen, Jesus, we're all screwed up. Maybe you need help."

But she was not the one who had had an affair with Grace Downing shortly before his death. She was not the one who had been weak and just ten months after both she and George had vowed eternal love.

In more contented moments she considered George's affair with Grace to be the turning point, she could almost be grateful to Grace. At such moments, if she had been granted the ability to change the past she would have erased her mother. *Dele* her, as the crossword says. Strike her out. Make her nothing more than a blank space in her mind.

'Gwen,' she said to herself, 'you worry too much.'

That had to be true. If she were really a nut she would be able to scrap all the memories and be fashionably neurotic with the rest of the world. If anything, she was too sane. She couldn't even drink enough to forget what she was doing. When she got too high she invariably suffered the agonies of the damned and felt suicidal over some drunken, relatively innocent escapade. Not that she was a wild one. Not Gwen Ferrier. But she was a talker when she was drinking and she said things like, "Ruthie, there is a certain responsibility involved in having pets." Ruthie, a neighbor, had a nice, friendly beagle which was left outside in the coldest weather and which, in the fall, was always laden with huge, hulking, gray sick, puky ticks. And Ruthie wouldn't be insulted, she'd just laugh, but next morning Gwen would remember and feel exposed, for she kept herself, mostly, giving of her inner thoughts only to George.

So if you remember things like that and let them fester inside you and make you feel as if you should run over to Ruthie's and apologize how would you forget Mama?

"You don't try to forget her," George said. "You try to understand her. Gwen, she was a young woman. She had a bad break."

"But my father loved her so," Gwen would say. "I remember how he'd kiss her and tell her she was pretty."

"She was pretty," George said. "And sexy."

Yes, she was that.

After her father died they lived in an apartment in the nice section of Winston Salem. Is Winston-Salem to be said to have a nice section? It was a small apartment with one bedroom, a sitting room, and a kitchen with a dining alcove. Gwen's bed was a pull-out couch in the sitting room, next to the bedroom door and sometimes they forget even to close the door. And it was always a different man and, as George put it, her mother was a noisy fuck, panting, moaning, crying out.

"Your mother does it," the boys would say. "What's wrong with you?"

She was a skinny child with weak arches which pained

her. The insurance money wasn't plentiful enough to buy clothing for her mother and two bottles of vodka a week and still have enough left over for the orthopedic shoe for Gwen. While not drinking or making love, her mother sewed, cutting down fancy party dresses for scraps of clothing so that, in Gwen's mind, she always looked freaky.

"She was just a lonely broad," George would say. "Don't condemn her for wanting to get something out of life."

It took her a long time to learn that her mother wasn't in pain when she would cry out and scratch at the same time. And everyone knew. The kids in school laughed at her, the dark-haired skinny, rather homely little girl in the cut-down red party dress with the lace and fringy sleeves, the girl whose mother put out.

George," she wept as she said it one spring night when she was a sophomore in college at Chapel Hill, "I can't marry you."

"Why?"

"I can't, that's all."

He insisted. "All right," she said grimly. "If you must know. I'm frigid."

He laughed. "You'll have to prove it to me."

She'd known him for over a year. His smile and his ease of manner had lured her into easy chats with him, had worked on her until, although she told herself that she didn't love him, could never love a man, she looked forward to seeing him, saw him with a quick little flip of delight deep next to her heart. Let him kiss her.

"You're a nice girl, Gwen," he told her. "The marrying kind."

She knew the flip words. Her affliction was a hidden thing. "Aren't you the hypocritical one? I've heard about you."

Experience is important in a man," he said, grinning. "Women don't need experience. It's an instinctive art with them."

He was warm, obviously sensual, but he never tried

to handle her, never forced her to indulge in the college ritual of making out. When he asked her to marry him, she'd never felt a male hand on her breast, had not even used Tampax, not able to bear even the thought of having a sanitary tube inserted into that virginal tract. Gwen the prude. Gwen the nut.

So she told him and he listened. "I wouldn't be good for you," she concluded. "You deserve a warm, exciting woman. Not me. You can have any girl you want. Why me?"

That grin. "I always promised my mother I'd marry a good girl, and you're the only virgin in North Carolina above three years old."

"Gee," she said haplessly, "what a solid foundation for a marriage."

She refused to see him for months. When the year was ending, he crashed up his motorcycle coming up the hill from Durham, wham-med into a series of pine trees demolished the bike, lay in the hospital with a severe concussion.

"God, Gwen," he said seeing her there when he regained consciousness, "I feel like a seven-acre boy."

"You're Gwen," his mother said. "We've heard so much about you. And I'm so pleased you've come. George was asking for you while he was delirious."

Asking for her.

When he was ambulant they drove in a borrowed car to Raleigh, checked in nervously at a Holiday Inn. "I won't marry you," she told him bluntly and [illegible] making the sacrifice. "But I will show you my [illegible]."

He thought a drink would relax her. But when he undressed her, she felt as if her hands were made of [illegible] and ice. His hands caused her to tremble. He was kind, patient, gentle. His heated breathing made her hair damp. He made him the embodiment of all those long-perished [illegible] less men who breathed and grunted [illegible] with her mother. She lay stiff as oak, suffering his caress, his kisses.

"We'll stop," he said.

"No," she said, tears running down her cheeks. "I have to prove to you."

"Why?"

"Because I love you and I want you to understand."

"Can't you relax?"

"Yes."

She was limp. She did not cry out when he penetrated her. She was dry and it was painful. She was pleased that it hurt her so. She wanted to be punished, for she was hurting him, too. He loved her, wanted her. And she had nothing to give—nothing, that is, which would compensate him for devoting his life to her. She lay happily as he worked in her and he stopped.

"Don't you feel anything?"

"I feel dirty," she said crossly.

"Good," he said, stepping his movement. He lay there for a long time. He talked to her, told her she was beautiful. She was not. She had mouse brown hair which was fine as baby hair and completely unmanageable. She had a nose too long for her face. Her skin was mottled by dark, freckle-like blemishes. Had they been freckles, they would have been cute and attractive, but as blemishes they were just disheartening. She was small-breasted. Her thighs did not meet, giving her a bow-legged look as she stood before her mirror naked. Her ankles, because of her weak arches, tended to touch, her feet splaying outward. Her two front teeth showed a large gap. No, she was not beautiful.

"You have a great ass," he said. "And I love your titties."

She was sick with shame, feverish with disgust.

"We could work on it," he said. "It's normal, Gwen, sex is."

"I know. I'm not normal, though."

"Does it make any difference that I love you, that I want to help you?"

Apparently it did. His patience, his gentleness paid off. Not the first time. The first time his voluptuous eagerness pushed him over the brink and she felt his seminal fluid

rush into her. She felt nauseous, hating his sweating body, his gasping breathing, his clinging.

"You see," she said, "as I told you, I feel nothing. Do you believe me now?"

"A lot of girls don't enjoy it the first time," he said.

"I hated it, George," she said. "That's the difference."

"Did you hate me?"

"Yes, when you were . . . doing it."

"I see."

"So you see that it would be a mistake."

"Would you let me try again?"

She wanted to bathe his sweat from her, wanted to be away from him, away so that she could rid herself of his filthy sperm, wash his taste from her mouth. But he was so concerned, so hurt. She allowed him to make love to her. He did nice things. First he cleaned her with a cloth from the bathroom, then he did a thing so shocking that she almost made him stop. Only her desire not to hurt him more, to convince him that marriage was impossible, stopped her from biting.

Nothing." He had a moustache. He was revolting. She was crying quietly. To hide it from him, she heaved up, pulled the sheet over his crouching body, hid her head and shoulders and face beneath it. From there she could pretend it was not happening. He was a warm wet feeling there, that was all. She closed her eyes. It was growing dark outside. It went on and on and she was able to divorce herself from the act.

She lay in total darkness, limply submitting to his touch, his obscene kiss, his fast and hot breathing. And her clitoris swelled. A tendril of something went snaking down, down, centered there. She opened her eyes, open, shocked. Darkness, the sheet over him. A stiffening of her legs, an almost imperceptible jutting of her loins. She recognized her feeling. She'd known it in her dreams. A wild hope sprang up in her. Her feeling, his love-making bear fruit, redoubled his efforts. His tongue was a wet entity. With a gasp, she pulled the sheet up, up over her head, hid herself from herself and from the world.

tucked the sheet under her head and lowered her hands to pull on his shoulders, his head. He came to her, filled her, and there, in darkness, hidden by the covering sheet, air getting stale with their joint gasps, she found that certain body movements are instinctive.

She giggled wildly, happily. George kissed her, smeared his musky smell over her cheeks.

"See?" he asked.

She did not tell him that her first ecstasy had been a brief moment followed by sickening remorse, self-hate, shame. She had hope and she loved him.

In all her life she had never had anyone to love her and her alone. In all her life, till George, she had never had anyone.

In order for her to keep her scholarship, they were married in secret. She was just twenty. He was almost twenty-two. She lived in the girl's dorm, he in a fraternity house. On weekends when he had the money they would drive to the Raleigh area motels. There they would undress beneath the sheets in darkness until her shame and disgust was overcome by her body.

Ten months after they were married George had sex in the back seat of his car with [illegible] named Grace Dowling. Had he been content with having Grace only once, Gwen would never have known. But he was greedy. Greedy George. On an ensuing occasion George and Grace parked behind the stadium and were surprised by the campus patrolman, a talkative fellow. The policeman let it be known that he had caught Grace Dowling, the blond cheerleader, the one with the great legs, with her flimsies down. The name of the boy was almost incidental to the story, but it was mentioned and the story got around to Gwen. Confronted, George confessed.

Ten months after they were married.

She would not see him. She withdrew into herself and accepted as a fact a suspicion she'd had all along. She was not enough woman for George. Her hang-ups were just too much. She could never make him happy. In all of

her life, till George, she had had no one. Now she had no one again.

The reconciliation was brought about by George's parents. Confused, hurt, guilty, George talked to his father, who then talked to his mother. Mrs. Ferrier, a handsome, kindly woman, talked with Gwen in Gwen's room.

"If only you had not kept the marriage secret, darling," Mrs. Ferrier said. "If only we'd known."

Woman to woman, Mrs. Ferrier said, how foolish to live apart. Naturally a man would fall victim to the first loose girl who came along. Men, she explained, are weak creatures in some ways, lacking in resistance to the wiles of predatory women. It had happened, she insisted, simply because those two foolish children would not announce their marriage and live together as man and wife should. That, she announced, was the way it would be. There would be an immediate change. Gwen was not to worry about a foolish scholarship. The Ferriers would pay her expenses, would rent them a cottage. They were not wealthy people, but they had enough to help their son's happiness.

"But I'm inadequate," she said.

"Nonsense," said her mother-in-law. "You just need counseling, that's all."

"Gwen, you need help."

Under the sheets in the summer. Under the blankets in the winter. Cringing when he had to undress in front of him, hating it, loathing her body, feeling dirty. But he press hypocrite that she was, enjoying it once it was done.

3

Possum Creek had a tidal variation of some four feet. When the tide was full, it lost some of its muddy, black look and showed a tinge of the green ocean water which fed it. Falling, the tide carried debris from the vast marshes on the inland side of the island. The creek abounded in blue crabs in season, was dimpled with the jumps of popping mullet, had once, before upstream pollution, been a prime speckled trout fishing ground. The creek meandered up from the Cape Fear alongside the northern end of Pine Tree Island, sweeping out in a *U* to eat into the marsh, coming back to lick the land and leave bare, black mud banks under the spreading branches of huge pines.

The island itself was a long one. In past years the Ferrier family had summered in a cottage on Big Hill Beach, a sprawling resort community which occupied the southern end of the island. Thus, George was familiar with the locality and had spent some of his boyhood exploring the creeks of the marshes in a small boat, dragging through the undeveloped woodlands at the northern end, digging for pirate gold, and doing all the other things young boys do when left to their own devices in an outdoor setting with plenty of salt water.

Upon graduation, George brought Gwen to Big Hill, covered her with musty-smelling sheets in the family cottage, and did what she'd come to believe he liked doing best. They had been married just over two years and he had a job lined up in Winston with the family firm. During

the month spent on the beach, he escorted her to the places of his boyhood, including the point at the northern end.

She questioned the sudden transition from resort development to woodlands. George had coaxed a rusting jeep into operation, and they pushed through blue-traveled logging roads to the point. There she saw the foundation ruins of what must have been a huge house. It had obviously burned down. Charred pieces of wood stuck up in exposed sandy spots.

"Old boy from New Jersey owns the whole end of the island," George said. "This was his house. It burned before I was old enough to take advantage."

"Of what?" she asked innocently.

George grinned lewdly. "They still talk about her. She was much younger. A real hot one. They still talk, some of the old boys, about how all they had to do was sneak through the woods, whistle, and she'd come out."

"All men," Gwen said, 'are horrible.'

"Honey, it always takes two."

She didn't want to discuss it.

"Didn't make any difference what age or how many. There was a little gazebo down by the clear pond. I know where they'd go, with the old boy up in the house playing with his stamp collection or something."

"George," she said. "Please."

The clear pond was an oddity. It was ovate, had the bright green color of the water holes left after a massive strip mining operation for phosphates, held no life other than plant life, and owned its own grisly tradition. Once it had been a favorite spot for swimming, until a young couple, after the house had burned, had driven their car to the site and swam nude. Their car was discovered a full day later and their bodies a few hours after that, nude, close together, the girl's arms still locked around the boy, her hair streaming upward in the clear, green water, her eyes wide, wild.

Gwen refused on their honeymoon, after their graduation, to go into the water. George stripped, ran into the

water, blew and puffed and swam the hundred-yard length of the pond, yelled, "The water's great, honey," and came out dripping to laugh at her.

"What I want," he said, brushing clinging drops from his skin so that he could dry in the hot sun, "is to own this point, every acre of it. Then I'll build a house with the bedroom out on pilings or cantilevered out over the pond. There'll be a little balcony outside the bedroom and each morning I'll just walk out, fall into the water and then I'll never have to take a bath, except in the winter time when the pond freezes over."

At the time, neither of them dreamed that his talk was more than idle chatter.

Death and a good insurance man made it possible. Back in Winston-Salem, George went to work with his father. His fresh degree in electrical engineering made it possible for him to pass the F.C.C. test for a First Class Radiotelephone ticket. With this piece of paper from the federal government, he was allowed to repair licensed communications equipment, adding a new dimension to his father's business. In a time when citizen's band radio was becoming a fad, George was kept busy, but he took time to learn the other aspects of the business, and when he'd been there a year he was made a full partner. His draw plus end-of-the-year bonuses, made life comfortable for them, but they were not rich until a small commuter airliner crashed coming into a Virginia mountain town, killing, along with a dozen others, George's mother and father. There was partnership insurance, mortgage insurance, life insurance, two rather hefty travel policies purchased at a vending machine before the elder Lowers left for their holiday in New York, and a couple of gimmick accident policies which also paid off. George at twenty-seven, found himself the sole owner of a thriving television and appliance store and, after taxes, nearly cash which, when the proceeds of the sale of the store were added, came to just over three hundred thousand dollars.

Gwen understood. "Honey," he said, "when I walk

into that place I look around for Dad. I expect him to pop up from the rear and say, 'Hey, boy, we aren't running a bank, you're due here at ten of nine sharp', or, 'Hey, boy, it's your turn to sweep up.' It's damned lonely, honey. I don't think I can take it. All the fun's gone out of it."

"We can't live the rest of our lives on it," practical Gwen said.

"No. I can make a dollar. Dad saw to it that I had a little business experience crammed into my head. He didn't let me spend all my time back at the workbench. I could find a new town, maybe one of the developing areas along the coast. I could start small and just concentrate on repair work. I like that. I'd never want to give up playing with electronic junk. It's just that, well, it's not the same at the store."

So they sold the store and bought the new MG and, to take George's mind off the death of his parents, drove to Florida with the top down. They swam in a clear, cold spring in a national forest near Ocala, where George was reminded of the green, strange little pond on Pine Tree Island.

The area, they found, was changing rapidly. A large electric company had started construction of a multi-unit nuclear generating plant. In a backward county, where tourism and fishing were the chief industries, the nuclear plant was welcomed, at last by those who owned land and stood to gain by increased land values and by business men and booster types in general. The plant was located near the village of Ocean City, on the Cape Fear. A canal would draw Cape Fear water to the plant to cool the reactors and would extend in a huge, wide scar, across a natural marsh along a creek on the inland side of the Intracoastal Waterway, go under the Waterway in huge pipes, rise again to cut straight across a producing marsh to Pine Tree Island, and there take a big bite through the end of the undeveloped property next to the point. It would be, the environmentalists said, the last cooling canal built in the United States. Cooling towers cost more

money, and, naturally, the power company first filed for permission for the less expensive cooling canal. There were no voices in the county strong enough to stop the despoliation of a good swath of swamp and producing marshland.

When George and Gwen drove to the island they stopped in to talk with a real estate man, an aging fellow who had watched the beach grow from nothing, be destroyed in a killer hurricane, then come back to be an instant slum with cheaply built waterfront cottages, dinky second row houses and other weekend retreats scattered about the woodlands.

"We might just be able to work something out" the real estate man said when George expressed his interest in the point property. "The canal is taking a big bite of it. The rest will be on the other side of the canal, sort of an island in itself. The old boy that owned it is dead and his heirs seem to be pretty well off up there in New Jersey somewhere. They sent a lawyer down to dicker with the power people and I got the going price for undeveloped land out in the middle of the county. They didn't even seem to know that waterfront and creek front is worth a dollar."

George rented a cottage and waited nervously while the real estate man contacted the lawyer who had represented the absentee owners of the point. "I told him," he said to George and Gwen, "that the place was kicked as far as development is concerned. No one in his right mind is gonna build a nice house next door to a canal full of radioactivity."

"Just George," Gwen said.

"Actually," the old man said, "there ain't much radioactivity in it."

"I know," George said. He'd made quite a study of the situation, getting his hands on the power company's reports, talking to anyone who had other information or gossip to offer. "The radioactive level of the water will be less than that of the background radiation."

To Gwen, this meant that even if it were less than normal background radiation, it was still an *addition*.

amount of radiation. However, her seven years with George had been the happiest time of her life. At last she had someone who loved her for herself. This was surely worth more than exposure to a minute amount of radiation. She'd have braved the Van Allen belts for a broom for George. If it turned George on, it was fine with her.

Two hundred three and a quarter acres were involved. The lawyer asked seven hundred per acre. George winced. The real estate man, with George in attendance on an extension telephone, snorted. "We're not even close enough to talk," he said.

The real estate man offered one hundred per acre, following his offer with a detailed run-down of the disadvantages of the property. Some of it was low, there was no timber just second-growth stuff, and it was going to be cut off from the island by the canal. But he had told George earlier that the power company would have to build a bridge over the canal to give access to the property.

"If the terms are favorable," said the lawyer, "we might come down to five hundred."

"How about eight hundred and two?" the real estate man asked. "That's our best, and final offer. Take it or get stuck with a swamp cut off from the roads by a radioactive hot water canal."

They took it. George chuckled as he tried to crowd the amount into the small lined space on the check. Sixty-one thousand twenty dollars and zero cents. Gwen had wanted. She had worried about money most of her life. To her, writing a check for the amount of the new MG was pure extravagance. Now George was laying out over sixty thousand dollars for a swamp cut off from the roads by a hot water radioactive canal. When she thought

"Don't worry," George said. "We have it all paid for. The house will be paid for. Our taxes will be low, because we'll be assessed for undeveloped land. We won't have to touch the rest of the money once we're established. I'll make enough working part time to live on. We don't

have any expensive habits like shooting heroin or wearing French originals."

"I might like to wear French originals," she said.

"Look, honey, if that's what you want I'll tear up the check."

"If you're laying out too much in a lump, young fella," said the real estate man, "I'd be willing to take some of the waterfront off your hands."

"What do you want?" George asked, being very, very serious.

"You know, silly," she said. "I want what you want."

"Not here in front of the nice man," he grinned.

Crazy, delightfully crazy, and so damned pretty she could charge herself up just by looking at that shock of stubborn, wild blond hair.

Then there was the architect's fee. And bulldozers to cut a road which wouldn't tear up the new M G. And the sound of heavy equipment twenty-four hours a day. The power company was attacking the canal from both ends, eating the woodland on the inland side in vast gulps, and sending a huge, floating drag line to the ocean side to start cutting a trench through the dunes, chewing up into the land, exposing the dead and water-logged roots of an ancient cypress forest. Bulldozers. Drag lines. Earth movers. Whoom. Crash. Creak. Rumble.

"I'm going to watch it go up stick by stick," George said. "How would you like to buy a mobile home and put it next to the clear pond, and that way we'll be there to supervise every nail?"

In the end, he compromised. They rented a small, dark, damp little house built of cement block and cheap varnished interior panelling. It was a gloomy dungeon and they spent as little time in it as possible. They saw every movie which came to Ocean City and the nearby, larger town. They took short trips to the Outer Banks, to the mountains, to Charleston. The money spent in this manner seemed insignificant when compared with the weekly bills for material and labor as the contractor began work on the dream house on Possum Creek.

When the time came, Gwen actually enjoyed shopping for appliances, light fixtures, carpeting and all the other goodies which were going into the dream house. She found a magnificent old chandelier in a junk shop. George rewired it. She spent long, dusty hot afternoons prowling antique shops, bought marbled topped furniture and sturdy chairs made in 1948, much more comfortable than anything on the market in the new furniture stores. And cheaper, even when reupholstered in good quality crushed velvet.

"Look," George said, "if you're gonna make the house look like a Victorian harem, it's got to have a red rug."

If George wanted a red rug, George got a red rug. She built the big glass-fronted room around it, and made the walls gleaming white, the fireplace antique brick, the furniture warm in velvet and gold and rich blue.

"Gaudy," she said, but secretly pleased.

"I can hardly wait to try out the rug," George said, grinning his teasing, sensual grin.

Watching a large house being constructed is, in many ways, a frustrating experience. At first, when there is just the foundation in it seems as if the job has already dragged and has decided to halt for a while. Then with the floors laid, the studs and the subflooring down, making the house a huge platform, it begins to look large enough to stand behind. It shrinks again when the wall studs go up, and becomes dark and gloomy when the roof and walls are in place. During all this time, the progress is daily. At this stage, brought surprises on returning, for the workmen would have done something fantastic like closing in the whole back structure with brick veneer. The brick and stone work went ripples to, and then things slowed to a frustrating crawl as the interior finish began.

By the time they got to know a house during construction, George and Gwen had a routine. Breakfast, when the weather was warm, a drive to the house site to see who was working and spend a idle, happy activity. And then a trip back through the woodlands in the late evening with the sun low and the second-growth denseness becoming dark

and forbidding. They'd walk through the house and discuss progress. George would walk around it, admiring it. As it took shape, he was more than pleased.

It was an attractive house. Long, low, it had multiple roof lines, lots of glass, stone for accent, brick for color, and stained wood for texture. The bedroom end of the house snuggled next to the sandy shore of the clear pond. George was endlessly anxious to see the balcony added, but the contractor saved it for last.

It was growing cold. The rented house had poor heat, just baseboard electric units which, when turned on, promptly blew a fuse. Fortunately, the weather held. November was a glory, nights cool and making for good cuddling in bed, but the days were pure Indian Summer. The rains were less frequent than usual, allowing for full time work. Gwen began moving her furniture in in early December. The rural electric cooperative had run a line along the old right of way, a line that once extended up the point to the Harmon house, which had stood just a few hundred yards away from the new building. The house was heated now. It was lighted. It was cozy and huge and empty, and one evening before the moving began while there was nothing in the house but huge expanses of red carpet, George gathered fat pine kindling and wood and built a fire. "I christen thee George's House of Lust," he grunted, bumping beers with Gwen before attacking her playfully and rolling her in front of the roaring fire on the thick, red carpet. She fought playfully, but gave in, her feeling for him overflowing. At first she was uncomfortable, felt the old shame and dirt as her excitement grew more intense, but still growing playful, as he removed her slacks and panties, undid her bra, pushed it up under her neck.

The floor was hard. She kept thinking that someone would walk up. Every light in the house was on. There were large expanses of glass. She kept turning her head to look at the black glass and the darkness beyond and didn't achieve. George did. Then he prowled, bare, over the house, drinking beer and admiring the barren beauty

of the rooms. She envied him. He was the original model for a happy fellow, no worries, no hang-ups, just a heart very easily made glad. Since she had the same things, plus George himself, why couldn't she loosen up, enjoy his ribald, happy sex, and forget everything but the new house, George, and her luck?

George didn't want any lawn to mow. The contractor sent in a crew, picked up the building debris, smoothed the earth, and left it natural. Falling leaves covered the bare areas, making it look as if the house had been there not just weeks but years. And George had his balcony. It was built on two pre-stressed concrete pillars which had been sunk into the very edge of the clear pond. The balcony extended out some twenty feet, riding on huge cypress beams. It was six feet above the water and reached to the quickly shelving depths of the pond. It made an excellent diving platform. Below it, to shore up the bank of the pond, there was a brick patio on a concrete slab with an outdoor grill.

In the house there were two bedrooms, one of them behind the balcony and huge, the other suitable for guests and, in the future, for a nursery. There were three baths, one in each bedroom and one in the big playroom, which housed a pool table, a ping-pong table, a dart game, a poker table and a stereo set for parties. There was a large room for George's personal use, and a room with northern glass exposure which was, temporarily, a TV room, but which could be converted into a studio if Gwen ever got serious enough about her hobby of painting to want such a work area. There was a combination kitchen-dining room, separated by dark, beautifully rubbed cabinets, and a very large main room with its glass wall looking toward the marsh, which was visible only through chinks in the solid growth of trees. Then there were storage areas, an appliance room, a closed garage and cypress decks off the front.

Approaching the house was always an experience for Gwen. The woodland had not been disturbed, save for widening the old timber road. Then, suddenly, stone and

stained wood and glass and brick appeared in tantalizing flashes through the trees, and then one was in the circular drive, and it was breathtaking. She loved it. She felt very warm toward it. She'd watched it grow from bare bones, she knew every piece of wood in it, and she felt so much at home in it that she would walk the length of the house, in darkness, without so much as a tremor.

This seemed important to her. The basic insecurity of her childhood had marked her in many ways. One of them was in her habit of wanting a night-light. She'd always slept with a light. It was just the way she was. And she locked doors and windows. She also, when feeling low, looked under beds and into closets before retiring, even with George in the house. If she didn't look under the bed she couldn't turn to snuggle with George, thus putting her back to the side of the bed and exposing it to that something which would reach up something, a bony claw, an unidentified thing, and dig into her back, digging, digging, cutting the tender flesh there and making her scream with agony. And a trip in darkness through the rooms of the dark little rental house would have been unthinkable. Something could lurk in each shadow.

Her insecurity had been a topic for many deep discussions during the seven years of their marriage. George had grown to accept it, to try to ignore it, since he couldn't cure it.

"What do you expect to find under there?" he'd ask as she knelt to look under the bed before turning off the light.

"I don't know," she would say truthfully. "Nothing, I guess."

"Your lover?"

"Silly."

"Let us explore the nature of fear," George would say in his early attempts to cure Gwen. "Basically, it is the fear of death which is underneath all fear. Once you had another fear, the fear of losing your chastity by force, but that is no longer possible, so that fear must not be what makes you look under the bed."

"I'm not expecting to discover a mad rapist," she said.

"We fear dead bodies," he said. "We shudder at tales of walking dead and rotting bones coming to life, and we scream if we find a severed hand in bed with us."

"You're pretty terrible, you know."

"What do we see when we see the severed hand? We see ourselves. We are reminded by the sight of a dismembered body that we, too, can be dismembered. Every time we are fearing death. Honestly, we're all going to pop off. You could trip over the vacuum cleaner and break your neck. You could choke to death on a potato chip. You could eat something that made you sick and require an artificial stomach by the time you're twenty-one. A million die of perforated ulcers before I could get you to a hospital."

"I don't know, George. I know. It's not a person. Really I know it's human nature to have a morbid fear of great violence against helpless women, but I don't shudder thinking about an evil man of violence."

"Being afraid of the dark is something most people outgrow. I prided myself that I had, but when I was a kid and my dad took me out on the water, I had to be right and I set me to rowing for hours. I saw sharks' fins in every shadow. Then, after a while, when they didn't eat me, I got brave and started throwing rocks at them. The coward's bastard is fear and. They're more scared than I. Now I carry a couple of rocks in my work and bears under the bed that you could throw shoes at them and run them away."

"Just get to work, you hulk," she asked.

"We fear pain. Now I, myself, have it heavily that I am can get the shakes as the result of torture. Remember the John D. MacDonald book where the evil guys were torturing someone. He said and I agree, that torture is bad, but relatively few people break. You know, deep in your heart, that the cat doing the torturing is a real nut. I mean you can't do a lot of things to a man before he's totally gone. You start getting mental and you'll scream but you know you're lying. Sometimes you scream from the fingernails. The toe comes off, even if you have to cut off the nail. Even the

nail will grow back. But if you know that this cat is going to do something irreparable to you, like cut off an arm or gouge out an eye, then you know real fear. The fear of dismemberment and death. Now since you don't have to worry about that unless I eat loco weed and go ape, then what do you fear?'

"I don't know."

"The dark? I should take you coon hunting."

"I'd hang onto you with both hands."

"Not a bad idea," he said. "Grab me now."

But there was no fear in the dream house. Working hard, hair in a scarf, muscles aching, she arranged and moved furniture and settled in and slept deep sleep the first full night. George, up before her, was whistling and happy. "You left the door unlocked all night and no one ate us," he said.

She hadn't even thought about checking the doors. And she could walk the length of the house. She did this several nights later, waking with a thirst and going all the way to the kitchen for ice water, neglecting to turn on the lights because she hadn't bothered to put on anything over her pajama top. "Well, Gwen," she said. "We—"

Such a friendly house it was. Warm. The colors were vibrant and everything was so clean and new. It was a glorious winter. George had rented a building in Ocean City and was installing equipment. He had plenty of work more than he wanted actually. Ocean City was a fishing town and there were dozens of boats with radiotelephones. He was the only man within thirty miles licensed to work on them. He was swamped with radio work and depth-recorder repair, and he had to turn away quick cash money doing home TV sets. They were no longer living on their capital. Their expenses were low. They ate what they liked, drank the best booze, went to movies, and had dinner at nice places, and still there was more money coming in than going out and it was a blast, with a fire in the fireplace and Don Ellis playing "Turkish Bath" on the magnificent music system George had installed in the big room, and the wind whistling outside and a light

snow in February to give a fairyland atmosphere to their woods.

Inland, the snow brought hardship and death. It was a heavy fall, closing schools and roads and bringing the entire state to a frozen standstill. Even in Ocean County, schools closed but there, near the warmer water, the effects were short-lived. Early morning was elves' work on the trees, whose limbs were artistically draped in snow and diamonded with ice. George, the early riser, roused her out and forced her to walk, still half asleep, to the glass doors leading onto the balcony. She was jarred into full alertness by the beauty. The white glare squinted her eyes and tears formed, tears of joy engendered by beauty.

She put on a set of George's insulated hunting underwear and rounded her form with layers of outside clothing. He met her outside, having gone out before her to break the clean, virgin snow. Pearly snowballs flew. There was a thin film of ice on the closed pond, making it a glassy-thin jewel of green.

Before the snow began to melt at midmorning, they had covered the estate. They both said the word estate in quotation marks, feeling each other ashamed of having such a pretentious and hangerwith, two hundred-three and a quarter acres of swamp, cut off from civilization by a radioactive canal.

"I wonder if they're cold?" Gwen said, shivering as she looked up at pine boughs sheathed in ice and topped with a frosting of snow.

"No, Gwen," George laughed. "You can't take all the poor trees inside by the fire to warm them up."

Sam and Mandy were christening every object, discovering the fun of snow. Mandy's blackness was a vivid contrast to the white. Sam, grey going on white, blended in now and then and seemed to disappear. Mandy, the larger, threw herself on Sam and tumbled him. Sam rose, shook, examined nearby trees with a calculating eye, lifted one leg and sent it at a sapling pine.

"O.J. Sam's warming up one of them," George said.

"They shudder when a dog comes near," Gwen said.

"My wife, the nut."

"I talk to trees," she said, keeping her face straight.

"You didn't do too well with those African violets," George said. Hands in pockets, they were walking back toward the house.

"I didn't know about talking to them then."

"Aaaarg," he groaned. "That's the trouble with teaching women to read."

"It's not just a crazy idea," she said. "They feel. Plants feel. They appreciate it when they're watered. They faint when they're threatened with violence."

"I know a few trees that are going to have severe and fatal fainting spells," George said. "I'm going to buy a chain saw and cut some wood for the fireplace." A large deposit of snow, loosened by the heat of the sun, fell. It spattered down from a high limb, going down his neck.

"See," Gwen said, giggling. "They heard you."

She helped gather wood when the snow was gone and the warmer weather had returned. There was a wealth of fallen trees and dead limbs for starting fires in the big fireplace, and plenty of the resin filled longleaf pine, called fat-wood, to kindle. George bought his chain saw and felled oak. It sizzled greenly on the fire, burned for a long time, and sent out waves of heat.

With the fire, hot chocolate and cheese toast in the early evenings, and music on the four big speakers in the main room, the cozy winter passed. It was spring before it occurred to Gwen that not once had they had a party in the house. Telephone men, meter readers, and a stray insurance salesman had knocked on the door, but not once had there been a guest in the house. George knew almost everyone in the area and kept Gwen up to date on gossip. She had met many of the local people while hanging around George's shop or doing the groceries in the local markets, but neither of them had expressed a desire to invite people to the house.

"Who needs people?" George asked, when Gwen talked about the situation in early March.

"I don't know," she said. "I guess I'm just a worry-wart. I keep thinking that we're too happy, too smug, too content with ourselves. Perhaps we should share it."

4

"Soft living and good food," Gwen said. George was nude, standing in front of the mirror in the bedroom and examining his waistline with a critical eye. He had saddle-bags.

"You're too good to me," he said.

"We could start playing tennis," she suggested.

"Push-ups is the thing," he grinned. "With a living mat underneath me."

"My husband, the sex fiend," she said.

"Rape, rape," he said, advancing on her. She squealed in mock fear and struggled, but only briefly.

"Turn off the light," she said.

"No."

She closed her eyes. It was still there, deep inside her, that old shame. But then it was buried underneath their matched passions. He laughed, however, when she threw on a robe before walking to the bathroom.

"My wife, the prude," he said.

But it was better. She liked it that way. Theirs was a good, sensuous relationship. She felt very, very close to him during the sex act, after her initial reluctance was gone. No covers these days, and after the first few moments of unease, she could bear the light. George liked to see.

She was improving with age. At twenty-seven, her thighs had gained enough muscle and weight almost to close the gap between them. Her hips had spread into womanly beauty. Her skin was smooth, soft, and taut. Her

face had thinned and her features seemed to be coming together. Her nose, once seemingly too long, was now merely a nose of great character, with delicate lines. Her mouth was her good point, along with her arched eyebrows and her brown eyes. She'd taken to wearing her hair in a sophisticated pull-back.

"For an old broad, you're pretty sharp," George would say. Then, when he gained weight during that long, cozy, happy winter, he said, "I'm going to start exercising. I'm not going to go to pot when you're getting better looking."

He came home with a big wheeled lawn mower. Gwen smote her forehead and said, "My husband the nut. A lawnmower and no grass."

"This is no lawnmower," he said, "but a miniature brush hog."

So George mowed his trees. In the cleared area around the house, squirrels worked endlessly, teasing the dogs and the cat, digging holes, planting acorns and forgetting them. The natural fall of leaves helped, so that with early spring the small, green oak shoots were prolific. In addition, a fern seemed to have the ability to grow overnight. While Sam and Mandy ran and barked excitedly at the spitting, buzzing lawnmower, Gwen sat on the dock and watched George mow trees. The lawnmower was a powerful one. George, once he had mowed the cleared areas, could move into the nearby brush and take down young trees up to three feet tall, and almost half an inch thick. However, the mower complained at this and sent pieces of dead wood made clanking noises and nicked the blades. George attacked the brush in another fashion, with a new ax, cutting the brush below ground level so as not to have stubs sticking up. Gwen helped with the operation, stacking cut brush to burn. They had a cold beer over the fire at the end of the afternoon. The new brush, heavy with sap, burned with a cracking hiss. The fire was fed by dead wood piled at the bottom. A thirsty vine, which grew with profusion, clung to and climbed into the tallest trees, but it cracks and snaps almost as loud as small firecrackers.

In pulling down the vines, George stuck thorns into his hands "Burn, you mothers," he said, with mock anger "Serves you right. I hope it does hurt" He grinned at Gwen. "See that big thorny bastard over there? I'm going to cut it and burn it Paint with fear, you bastard."

He was teasing her. She smiled.

"What I thought was, we'd gradually clear out all of the underbrush and some of the smaller trees between here and the marsh," George said

"Yes," she agreed. "It's a shame to waste the view"

That long Saturday was filled with the snarl of the chain saw, the popping of the lawn mower, and the sharp, solid sound of the ax biting into wood The fire was kept going, burning until darkness forced them to halt the great pioneering clearing operation George, exhausted, came out of the shower after Gwen, mixed a tall one, and fell into a soft old chair with new gold velvet upholstery Gwen felt good The exercise had stimulated her She slept well, at first, when they went to bed

She awoke with the clammy stench of nightmare on her body, cold sweat a deep, gnawing dread in her The dream had been vague but powerful Terrible pain Legs being severed, cold metal biting in Eyes wide she tried to dispel the feeling Around her, the house seemed to be alive Still settling, expanding and contracting with the heat of the spring sun followed by a cool night, it cracked and groaned The wind had come up during the night The day had been unusually calm for March Now there was a rushing hiss of gusts and an occasional clatter of screens as the gusts pounded the house She remembered the fire They'd left it smouldering She got up, the cool of the night drying the perspiration from her limbs In a pajama top, the only night garment which met with George's approval, she walked out of the bedroom into the hall Something cracked in front of her and her heart leaped But it was her house, her friendly house She pushed on, guiding herself in total darkness to the living room and felt her way across The outside was black, for the moon was covered by clouds. She stood in front of the glass

doors and peered into the darkness. There was a glow of red at the edge of the clearing where they'd built the fire. As she watched, wind whipped sparks away. A flaming picture hit her, a visual image of the woods burning, great sheets of red leaping up and leaves steaming, cracking with the heat, and burning with sizzling bursts of fire. The vision seemed to hurt, sending sheets of pain through her.

Behind her there was a sound. She whirled and tried to see into the darkness of the living room. There was only shadow and deeper shadow, and she felt the old, familiar near-panic of night fear.

"This is my house," she told herself. She walked carefully, her eyes wide, head not turning but her eyes flicking from side to side. In the darkness, her eyes proved tricky, picking up motion at the far edge of her peripheral vision. Her hand was shaking and the cold sweat of fear was back as she stabbed once, twice, three times before turning the light switch and flooding the room with blessed light.

George was hard to arouse. When he could understand, she told him the wind was blowing and the fire was in danger of spreading. He rose, groaning, went with her to the living room, turned out the lights that he could see outside, watched the glow of embers in the wood and shrugged. "It'll be all right," he said.

"Shouldn't we go out and put it out or cover it with dirt or something?"

He groaned, stretching already stiff muscles. "*You* go if you're so worried."

He left her, tumbling back to fall into the bed. She almost ran out of the room, fighting the need to look behind her, although her reason told her that the shadows were nothing more than her familiar furniture. She had difficulty getting back to sleep. She did not dream again, but there was pain in her legs when she awoke, the achy pain of sore muscles. That and nothing more.

George, too, was stiff. He made a great show of it and demanded tender treatment which he received, with a special breakfast and a rub down afterwards. Then, in

spite of his new blisters on his hands, he was determined to get back to his pioneering operation. "Work the stiffness out," he said.

It was another lovely day. They began work just before noon that Sunday. They cut and hacked and mowed and sawed and chopped their way into the tangled growth, piling brush high, burning it. It was rewarding work because their progress was so visible. The area in front of the house began to take on a parklike look. They left the larger trees, which were thickly spaced, selected patterns to be left in the smaller growth, left all pines to help form a carpet of mulch with fallen pine needles, and they trimmed holly and vaupon so that they would grow more shapely. The lawnmower mulched leaves and twigs, leaving a carpet of brown behind them.

They had sandwiches on the deck overlooking the clear pond, followed them with cold beer, went back at it and hacked away a swatch of underbrush, which was burned in early evening darkness.

Gwen slept fitfully with vague dreams. On Monday morning she was sore in every muscle.

Birds and squirrels loved the newly cleared area, scratching and digging happily. The squirrels drove the two outside dogs almost into hysterics. They were brazen little animals, coming to within a few feet of a sleeping dog, chattering, and then beating a hasty retreat when the dog aroused himself and gave chase.

By Wednesday, when George took a half-day off, Gwen was moving with more ease. George was fascinated with the clearing operation. They spent the afternoon cutting and burning, and the view was opening up. George talked about clearing all around the clear pond and then cutting bridle paths through the woods. Gwen said he certainly was ambitious. He said he'd already lost two pounds.

Gwen enjoyed the outside work. It was pleasantly warm, the sun was brilliant. There was enough wind to cool freshly created sweat, and it was sort of nice, at the end of the day, to look back and see where they had cut a parklike, clear spaces under the trees, the [illegible]

direct contrast to the lush growth of spring in the surrounding woods. She liked the fires, too. A cold beer was fine after hours of hard work bending, stacking, pulling, carrying, and cutting. She was the official tree shaper, armed with a small saw, powerful clippers, and a critical eye. Soft green branches fell as she shaped and patterned. Limbs too low to the ground fell to the saw.

She attributed her restless sleep to the tiredness of her body. The vague dreams were disturbing, but dreams were no new thing to her. As a child, she had always dreamed, in color, in painful vividness, and her dreams had almost always been bad. Child dreams were running in some thickness which slowed her movements to a crawl, while an unseen but terrible something closed in on her. Child dreams were being in a school room, suddenly discovering that she was naked. Her brush-clearing dreams were more vague, forgotten when she awoke save for a faint sense of uneasiness, and were associated, she felt, with her aching muscles. This, she felt, would pass. Exercise never hurt anyone.

The change in her feelings toward the house bothered her more than the fitful sleep and the dreams. The friendly house had become just a house, a space of darkness and shadow. A childish feeling of threat.

In addition, her old hangups were making themselves felt. She was unable to achieve the feeling of abandonment, missed it, resented having to take her climax when George wanted to make love during the day or with the lights on. She felt an overwhelming urge to drag the protective covers over her body to hide the shameful act, but fought this urge. She was not going to disappoint George, was determined not to have to hear questions, should she reveal that she was having a relapse into the neuroticism of her younger years.

Days alone in the house were filled with make-do tasks. She was becoming a perfectionist housekeeper. When George complained, she laughed at herself. "Is it that bad?"

Honey, I can't even lay down my hat without you

hanging it up in the closet, and it's been so long since I've used a dirty ash tray I feel indecently tidy. Do you know that you're gotten up three times already to empty this one particular ashtray?"

They were watching television. She had, she realized, been more interested in watching George, and leaping up to clean the ashtray after each of his cigarettes, than in watching the program.

"Find something to occupy yourself," he said. "Take a lover. Get a hobby."

"Sure," she said.

She drove the M G into town the next day, bought sixty dollars' worth of art supplies, moved things around in the studio room, and became an artist. George examined her efforts, kept as a surprise, and grinned. "Looks like trees," he said.

"Gee, thanks."

"Why in red?"

"Why?" She shrugged. "It's not really red. Sort of maroon. They look that way in the mornings with the sun on them."

"Send that gal to an eye doctor," George said. He hugged her. "Go, girl. I'm pleased to see you interested in something." He laughed. "Even red trees."

She'd taken art lessons, knew the basics of composition and the handling of colors, but had, she felt, precious little talent. But she liked the fresh smell of the paints and the ting of turpentine. She spent long hours, while George was working, in the studio. Her subject was almost invariably the view out the windows, toward the marsh. Trees.

"Trees again?" George would ask.

"I'm going to become the definitive painter of twisted oaks," she said.

When are you going to clean up this outhouse?" George asked playfully.

"You're never satisfied. When I was a perfect wife you complained. When I let the work go, being a genius sort

ously involved in putting every variety of tree onto canvas, you complain."

"Just as long as you don't sublimate your sex urge into your work," he teased.

The trees fascinated her, held her, dominated her. She thought trees, painted trees, dreamed trees. George cut trees, burned trees. The great American pioneer was to the creek, and spreading out clearing around the clear pond now, being noisy and sweaty and happy, [illegible] his songs as he worked, calling to Gwen to get the lead out with the cold beer.

Gwen dreamed that a furry little animal with long sharp teeth was crawling over her [illegible], chewing her flesh, biting into her soft breasts, decapitating her nipples. She woke, screaming.

"Wha, wha," George mumbled, sitting up.

"Nothing," she said. "Just a dream."

"Honey, go to sleep," he said, wrapping her in his arms, all warm and moist and very much needed dear to her. She slept in his arms and did not wake.

5

April's warmth produced a forest of bracken fern in the cleared areas. George frowned at them. They were messing up his personal park. With malice in his eyes for all intruding plants, he attacked, pushing the big-wheeled lawnmower over the clearing and wrapping it around trees to cut the small shoots which grew next to the trunks, bare-headed, a handkerchief knotted as a sweatband around his forehead, chest bare, muscles being hardened by his work.

Gwen watched from the deck. She hadn't been sleeping well. The power company people were digging a catch basin for spoil material directly across the waterway. On quiet nights the sound of earth movers and drag lines came and went with the movements of the wind. Fortunately, the work on the reservoir had been suspended temporarily, so the drag line there, a huge thing, was quiet.

The warm sun lulled her into relaxation. The angry snarl of the lawnmower, close at hand, was a friendly noise, their own noise. It was steady. She dozed.

She heard a voice, perhaps George's voice, but deepened, made hollow as if it reverberated inside a tin tunnel. "Underneath all fears is the fear of death. Pain is bearable if we know it is a temporary pain. We have faith in our healing ability, but when we feel some irreparable happening, that is true terror." A bulky form came at her. As in her childhood dreams, she seemed to be rooted to the ground, unable to move, swaying, making scant progress.

fighting the force which held her. The mass roared down on her, huge teeth snapping at her. The mouth closed, clashing metal teeth, and she screamed once before she felt the tender flesh being punctured and rendered. Her upper body fell, ripped from her legs and stomach and hips, and blinding terror caused beads of perspiration as she sat upright with a jerk. There was a terrible pain in her chest. She called weakly, then screamed, her lungs emptying themselves in the effort. George heard her over the snarl of the mower, cut off the engine and ran to her.

"Maybe you're pregnant," he said, when she'd explained her fright. "Does it still hurt?" He was kneeling beside her, his hair damp with his sweat and his forehead band blackened and wet. "We'll run into town and see a doctor."

"No," she said, eased. "It's all right now."

However, after more nights of eerie dreams she went to work with George and then sat in a doctor's office for most of the morning before being escorted into an examination room. She described her symptoms, the sleeplessness, the constant feeling of tiredness, and the unexplained pains which seemed to disappear when she was fully awake. She was not pregnant, although she and George were doing nothing to prevent it. Her minor dreams seemed to be working well. Her red cell count was a little low. She left the office after being assured that she was in basically good health and filled a prescription for vitamins and iron.

"He said I'm nuts," she told George, as he puttered, head and face hidden, inside a TV set.

"For that we have to pay money?"

"No, really. He said it was probably a reaction to the change. He said that whether or not I realized it I was probably deeply affected by the death of your parents and then the move into totally new surroundings, the excitement of building a new house and all. In short, he said it was just nerves."

"What have you got to worry about?" George asked, coming up for air and looking at her seriously. "You've got a rich, charming, handsome sex fiend for a husband, a beautiful house, two hundred three and a quarter acres

of swamp cut off from the world by a radioactive canal. You're probably the best painter of twisted oak trees in the Western world. So what's the worry?"

"No worry," she said. "It's just—" There was no word for it. It was just. Just that she was a fruitcake having nightmares which freaked her out?

She shopped for groceries, spent a pleasant hour talking with a dirty old man in a fantastic little junk shop, examined new books in the library, parked the MG on the waterfront and watched the working fishing boats come home with huge king mackerel, dolphin, and snappers, picked up George at four-thirty. At home she threw two club steaks into the oven, fried potatoes, opened a can of small green peas, and served a good Spanish wine. After dinner, George, feeling happy, stuffed, and relaxed, opened the gin and tonic season. She drank too much too fast, danced to thunderous music with the amplifier turned up full blast, so loud that the music could probably have been heard across the marsh and waterway in Ocean City, got gloriously giddy and silly, and wrestled on the rug with George, losing, of course. She slept soundly, to wake with a sour stomach and an aching head.

George was infuriatingly cheerful. He ate four eggs and drank half a tall can of V-8 juice and kidded her about her hangover. "At least I slept well," she said.

"So the answer is to become an alcoholic," he said.

"God, the cure is worse than the ailment," she moaned coming back to life slowly with a tall glass of ice water on top of coffee and V-8 juice.

That was the day Mandy died.

Feeling yukey and slightly suicidal, the usual after too much booze, she put on her private sun bathing bikini and lounged on the balcony over the clear pond, letting the sun help her sweat out the booze.

The dogs drank from the clear pond. This had worried Gwen at first, but George had sampled the water himself and declared it "fittin'." He'd even sent a sample off to the state lab to have it analyzed. It showed a few harmless bacteria and some phosphates, which explained the clear

green color, but it was pronounced harmless to livestock. So the dogs drank there and played there. Mandy, part hound with, perhaps, a bit of Labrador, loved the water and went into it often with great, bounding splashes. She was a loving dog, always full of spirit. So when Gwen noticed her staggering toward the clear pond, her attention was engaged immediately.

The big, black dog drank endlessly, and then staggered, feet crossing, to vomit into the sand. Gwen called her. The dog lifted her head but fell weakly. Gwen hurried to her. The dog's eyes were large, the pupils dilated. As Gwen neared, she saw the dog squat to urinate and then stagger back to drink from the pond.

Gwen half carried the animal to the balcony, where she petted her, talked to her, and offered sympathy. When the dog's rapid breathing slowed early in the afternoon, Gwen thought she was recovering, but the breathing lessened until, just before Gwen ran in to dress, it was painfully infrequent and the dog seemed almost asleep.

Gwen struggled to lift the dog into the back of the pickup truck, drove hurriedly into town, and stopped by the repair shop to tell George that Mandy was terribly sick. Mandy died on the way to the nearby small city, convulsing and then going into a coma from which she did not recover.

"Do you have any neighbors who don't like dogs?" the veterinary asked.

"No neighbors at all," Gwen said, having dried her tears.

"I hesitate to suggest it," the veterinary said, "but the way you describe her symptoms makes it sound like poison. Do you put out rat poison or anything?"

She shook her head.

"All I can do, Mrs. Ferrier, is perform an autopsy," he shrugged. "If you care to go to that expense."

"Yes," she said. "I'd like to know, at least." She was searching her mind, feeling vague guilt. Had she or George left out some poison? She could think of none. She drove home slowly, saddened. A brief letter arrived from the

animal hospital three days later. Mandy, said the report, had apparently eaten of *Datura stramonium*, known as Jimson-weed or Thornapple. The autopsy had found considerable amounts of hyoscyamine, atropine, scopolamine, and hyoscine, alkaloids common to the nightshade family of plants. It was, the vet reported with obvious pride, a rare case. It would probably be written up in a veterinary journal, since dogs seldom ate the poisonous weed, the few reported cases of Jimson-weed poisoning in the state having been confined, in the past, to cattle and sheep.

"I'll be damned," George said. "We're harboring killers on our estate." He was touched by Gwen's sadness, but, man-like, he would not admit his own feeling of loss over a mere dog. "I'll take my trusty mower and lop off the heads of all the jimson-weed killers I can find."

Gwen spoke quickly, without thinking. "They were only trying to—"

"To what?" George asked, looking at her questioningly.

"...to warn us," she finished, with a weak smile and a shrug.

"They who?"

"Oh, forget it," she said. It was so silly. She could not understand why she had said such a foolish thing.

For days Gwen kept Sam, the surviving outside dog, in the house. He was fretful and restless, wanting to be outside to chase squirrels and enjoy the spring sun. She forgot to call him back from a morning outing and he never again roamed the woods, barking at the elusive tree dwellers and looking for Mandy.

Satan, the black ex-tom, was also an avid hunter of animal in warm weather. He showed skill by climbing trees. He stalked birds with murderous intent, but fortunately for the birds hunted with a casualness bred of good food and lazy living.

Meanwhile, Pine Tree Land's own Paul Bunyan found a forest of small brush. He worked on the evenings, becoming hard and muscular with the exercise, and sweated more and more as he moved around the forest's ware clear pond. He planned having as a playful wood

plan a battle, walking ahead of his operation to consider the situation and the terrain before advancing his way slowly through the brush.

"It's the instinct of an Indian fighter," he said. "In the old days on the frontier they cut down all the trees around the house so that Injuns couldn't sneak up from tree to tree to do them in. When I'm finished, we'd be safe from bill collectors and magazine salesmen. Only a few one of them can sneak up on us."

Gwen checked out books from the library. She remembered happy Mandy and was curious about the poisonous plant which she'd eaten. With the aid of books she identified poison-weed, growing on the far side of the clear pond. In addition, she identified a half dozen other varieties of more or less poisonous plants. Poison oak, ivy, and sumac were there in abundance. There were also some wicked-looking briars of brier fruit, a cumulatively poison plant which even by animals, poison-weed, a poisonous plant whose leaves were often eaten by people after proper cooking as a green, but were and rattleweed. Arm, the complete her knowledge of the variety of plants which could kill or maim. She discovered that the common oak, the most prolific tree on the island could poison with large amount of tannic acid and a variety of [illegible] leaves and berries in quantity. Pines were poisonous. Some vines were poisonous. Tobacco poisoned when eaten. There were poisonous varieties of varieties of plants caused effects ranging from nausea and breathing to painful death.

She shared her knowledge with George, who treated it lightly. "Murderer," he said, looking at an oak tree.

The mower roared, the ax flew, and the chain saw snarled. There was a pile of neatly stacked firewood already enough to last for years. And the house was beginning to look out from the wood and, although the [illegible] preserved plenty of trees for cover and shade in the cleared areas. He was working his way around the pond, working also into late May when the days had begun to show the promise of summer. He would end his

work with a nude swim in the pond, and come up puffing and dripping to have his drink and dinner on the balcony, insisting on the outdoor bit in spite of vicious deer flies and mosquitoes. And his mornings began, as he'd dreamed, with a plunge into chill, clear water. His body, trimmed by the hard work, would slice into the water and disappear into the cool depths. He'd panic Gwen by staying under for impossible lengths of time, surfacing halfway across the pond.

Gwen began to live in shorts and bathing suits, but she was not, as yet, attracted to the water. "I need an outside temperature of at least ninety and a water temperature approximating a warm bath," she would tell George when he coaxed her to join him in his twice daily swims.

She was sleeping slightly better, but her nights were still troubled by dreams. The dreams seemed to follow a pattern having to do with dismemberment and death. "You sacrotabitch," she told George while discussing a dream with him, a particularly violent dream in which she had felt the pain of having both arms severed from her body. "You planted it in my mind with your talk about fears. Before that I was content with being chased by unseen monsters and being unable to move."

"Your problem, kid, is that you need a—"

"—a penis screw," she finished for him.

On a Wednesday in early June, she got a good screw. If the treatment had been applied strongly by Dr. George, the foremost practitioner of it, it would not have been unusual. However, this particular treatment was applied by a surprised and somewhat nervous reader from the rural electric cooperative. The effect on Gwen was much more than surprise.

6

At first she thought she was going mad and bounced words such as 'schizophrenia" around in her muddled mind. Certainly, the girl who had performed that animal act on the chaise longue on the balcony, in broad daylight, was not Gwen Ferrier.

Ummm, that girl had said, spread eagled, filled with relaxing man, there'd be more of *that*."

That girl declined the awkward embarrassed offer of a handkerchief. "I have this," that girl said, pulling on her bikini bottom with sensual motions, displaying her body with pride even after the act. *This*" was soaked with semen, a stained, horrible object held in a trembling hand, held at a distance, the offensive musky odor of semen wafting upward to cause nausea in Gwen's throat, how could it?

"I'd like for there to be more," the meter reader had said.

"Call first," that girl had said, actually reaching down to seize the limp member which moments before, had been the point of concentration for her entire being.

That girl had still been in a state of shock when the meter reader walked jauntily away and mounted a scooter. That girl was no longer present when the sounds of the meter reader's pick-up truck faded down the road. Instead, it was Gwen, holding her bikini top in front of still moist breasts, breasts which reeked with the tobacco and male odor of the meter reader's mouth. Gwen, back from a far place, screamed, exposing her breasts as she stuffed one hand, filled with bikini top, to her mouth, and bit like a hyena

with painful force. It was Gwen, sobbing hysterically, who ran into the bath, vomited, stopped. If the bone-handled and turned, horror-stricken, at the tell-tale moistness there. It was Gwen, face tear-stained and drawn, who sat on the red and gold sofa in the living room. George's bird shooting shotgun braced near her lips. She was inside. The inner portions of her thighs were [illegible]. She felt sure of her decision. Her right [illegible] the trigger. The double barrelled muzzle of the shotgun stretched her lips as she opened her mouth.

Now.

There was no need. She could not bear to think of telling him. He would find her. She [illegible] with the sight of another man. The [illegible] shown. Then he'd know what her having to [illegible] would do. He'd know.

George. George.

I [illegible] of death.

"Once, then, [illegible] rather than the fear having your chastity [illegible]. Since that is no longer possible, your fear must be the basis for death."

But he was wrong. She welcomed death. It crooked a bony finger at her and she [illegible]. It was cold blue steel in her mouth. It stank, and [illegible] of the trigger under her finger. [illegible] her life. In all her life she'd never had anyone love her for herself, had never had anyone to love. Then George had come and it had been [illegible]. He loved her. George loved her but [illegible]. However, the old magic had almost [illegible] the sickness in her. It hadn't been [illegible]. It had [illegible] to creep up on her in a different guise.

Sorry, the waiter reader had said, halting in mid-stride as he came around the house and, his head level with the balcony, looked up to see a woman in a bikini lying face down on the chaise longue. She had unfastened the top. Her breasts were resting in the small scrap of cloth but the bulging sides were exposed to the sun and to his

view. She'd pushed the tiny bottom down until it was a mere string crossing under her buttocks.

"I didn't know anyone was here," the meter reader said, backing off.

"Just me," the girl said, sitting up, holding the halter loosely in front of her breasts, and smiling.

What had happened then was so incredible that it halted her, froze her hand on the shotgun, her mind remembering and being astounded. She had always tried to know herself. She had taken several psychology courses in her search for herself. Now she found that her curiosity was not dead. Death, waiting, forced his arms patiently. He had the rest of the afternoon. Meanwhile, she questioned the afternoon's events. Why had they happened.

She had been at one with the world. She was a living entity merged into the whole. She dozed in the sun, her skin cooled. She felt lazy and comfortable. She felt as if she could sleep forever and not dream, and yet she was not asleep. She could hear the wind in the treetops and the far rumble of the heavy equipment. They were digging the canal on the mainland side of the waterway. Work continued on the spoil basin as machines pushed up dikes fifteen feet high to hold the mud and living beds and broken grass which would, when the dredges began work, be pumped back across the waterway into the basin. There it would stand, a two-mile-long, fifteen-foot-high mesa of stinking, reeking mud, smothering ages of saltmarsh vegetation, dead oysters and salt marsh. But the equipment sounds were distant and familiar. They were served as a soporific, taking her into the most delicious state of drowsiness she'd known in weeks. And in that pleasant state came thoughts, feelings, and an awareness which in retrospect was drug-like. She was on some kind of high. Like most young people, she'd experimented with some of the milder variety grass and a good piece of hash. And yet the high was not the dulled, stoned feeling of that thing which came with drugs. It was a clear-minded realization that she was breathing, living. She felt the land of

blood in her body, and felt the function of her organs. Strange things happened to her ears, without seeming at the time to be strange. She could hear the sound of the wind and heavy equipment only a background, the warm hum of a bee, she could feel the moisture of the earth, the sweetness of it, the delicate grating of soil particles under bare feet as she walked through newly plowed Illinois loam. She was more aware of the sun and she could feel its life-giving rays entering her, penetrating, warm. There was a sense of melodiousness in her awareness. Thoughts moved with pleasing slowness, drawing, possessing her. Every nerve ending was alive, and individual cells pleasured themselves as a heat spreading sexual awareness crept up and over from her pelvic regions and engulfed her.

There, just beyond her reach was the answer. Some magic of mind, some [illegible] brought it, her outside of herself, leaving the [illegible] Gwen Farmer behind and looking down on [illegible] of buttons. She stretched [illegible] her body as she'd never known it before, [illegible] deep inside which [illegible] newness.

It came floating into her awareness as a spore slowly floats on the wind. [illegible] the [illegible] the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

haste, and bathed him in the sweet juices of her body Abandoned, wild, silent

The thing which hurt most was her inability to remember a single time when she'd been so at peace with George Never, in seven years of marriage to a passionate man, had she known the quiet thick pleasure ripeness of it Never had she so opened herself, willingly, peacefully, exquisitely ecstatic Never had her inner tissue drunk so thirstily of male juices.

That she was pregnant was unquestionable That and that alone could explain the beauty of it.

To release the safety, she had to invert the gun The small, metal button moved with a click The weapon took on new meaning Now it was ready to play its role Deadly, small things inside its blue metal tubing were tense, ready to leap forward, and perform their function

She was calm There was no answer She could live a dozen lifetimes and not know why she'd done it

She positioned the weapon slowly and carefully She kissed the cold metal with parted lips an obscene kiss while death grinned and waited Her mouth was open, teeth grating on metal She positioned her foot and wiggled her toe experimentally She had according to George, toes like a monkey, movable small, and thin

"Please understand," she thought

Only an outward push on her right leg held her from death and relief from the unbearable guilt She tensed, took one last, long slow breath and held it The explosion was not gunpowder and steel but a living thing, a big, long clawed black housecat named Satan, leaping from the floor, all claws extended throwing his whole body through the air to knock the weapon from her hands It fell, hit the cushions and slid to the thick carpet with a thud No explosion Startled, she looked at a familiar creature changed into a raging beast The cat hissed on the sofa and regarded her balefully, eyes wild fangs exposed, a rumble coming from its throat

"Satan?"

Animals feel things. She knew that. It was incredible. He was trying to save her life. "You are wrong," she said, quite calmly, reaching for the gun. Long marks sprang up on her bare arm. The cat's movement had been so swift that she saw only the rest as blood welling up from deep scratches. She gasped. "Satan!"

There was something familiar about the way the cat was acting. It came to her. Hot August sun. Dirty water drying in the sun. Pushing through encircling weeds and brush to face an opossum. There was the same strange feeling of threat.

The cat stood between her and what she must do. She aimed a light blow at him and missed. She was rewarded by scratches on the back of her hand, drawn with lightning quickness as the hand flashed past. Knowing a new kind of fright, she rose. The cat stalked to his back arched, to the end of the sofa. It pounced, leaving a bloody trail of claw marks down her nylons, to stand over her on its feet and advancing to within inches of her making that terrible growling sound in its throat.

She ran. Bare breasts heaving. She bumped the door jamb painfully and gained the bedroom with the cat behind her, its claws digging at her calves. She stumbled, leaped for the bathroom, and closed the door, hard, just missing catching the cat in it.

She did not scream until she heard George's voice calling her, but since then she had been screaming with it. Weak, she had spent a timeless period of broken in the bathroom hearing the scratches on the door and the rattle of the cat's growl. Then his voice.

"No," she screamed. "No, George!" The cat. The cat.

"Honey." He was so dear to her, so beautiful. He stood there, his white coveralls massed and soiled, looking at her as she cowered against the far wall.

"My God, Gwen." He had seen the blood, the crusted scratches. "What happened?"

"Satan," she said.

"Satan?" He could not understand. 'He's asleep on the bed."

'Satan, he—"

George caught her as she fell.

7

If one is healthy, she found, one survives. The right arm, severed by a sharp blade just below the shoulder, bone crushed, jagged, can be closed off with fire. The system goes into protective shock, being unable, while aware to bear the pain. But one survives. Loss of blood is limited by the cauterizing. There is an endless period of pain. Two arms severed at once is more of a shock to the system and can kill. Healthy specimens can, at times, survive. Life lingers on, in any case, fighting, not taking the easy way of quick death. A jagged, dull blade can dismember the body limb by limb and leave occasional periods of consciousness during which pain is a roaring rush which takes possession of all the senses. A foot severed off burns the vital substances of the body into the earth. A leg chopped off causes the body to fall down, to writhe on the warm earth writhing in pain.

She knew all. They took her fingers one by one, giving her time in between to regain consciousness. Then, toes cut off her hands at the wrists. Then, whack, the arms at the elbow. Thunk. At the shoulders. She screamed in pain, roared with it, bellowed it, wept with it, begged them to stop, and sought death. Whisk. A foot gone. Thunk. A leg at the knee.

She was a twisting, bucking limbless torso, flopping on bloody earth, screaming. And relief came only after an eternity of suffering. Her blood refused to run, it just oozed slowly out, taking her life with it by degrees, leaving her a dulling awareness of death and a fading pain which

she knew was terminal. There was only a spark of life in her. Her skin was rotting, sloughing off. Inside the bones had begun to decay, yet still there was life, agonized, dying so slowly, so slowly.

"Please, please, please."

"Gwen. Hey, Gwen. You're fine. You're all right."

She didn't even hurt.

"The doc gave you a sedative."

"George?" Tears came. "Oh, George."

"Easy, kid. You're all right. I don't know what got into that cat." His face was so concerned. His arms. They'll have to keep him under observation. If he's rabid—" He paused grimly.

The hospital was old and small, and crowded. There were no private rooms. The woman in the other bed in Gwen's room was a perky senior citizen with a new scar to indicate the removal of a non-malignant growth from her stomach. She was an inexhaustible source of an active tongue. She never slept. There was no opportunity for Gwen to talk. She had to tell a highly censored version of the event. Dr. Peter Brass, who had examined her in his office, was quite interested. He was a tall, handsome man, to his thirty nurses but with an aura which still appealed to feminality. Gwen told him and George that she'd been sunbathing, had come into the house to shower off the suntan oil, and had been attacked without warning by the animal, gentle pussycat. She felt guilty about not telling Sam. She knew why he had attacked, but what could she say? She couldn't explain it. She wasn't even sure she could explain it to George.

During the first night she was under heavy sedation. It was into the next afternoon before Dr. Brass allowed her to come out of the drug haze long enough to think clearly. Then the full meaning of what had happened hit her anew, and she was at once numb, yet desperate. She could not bear to look into George's cheerful face and think of what she'd done to him and to their love. To do was still the logical answer.

George guided her tenderly to the car, after two nights

in the hospital. "I just don't understand, honey," he said, as he started the car. "Braws said you were high when you brought up, and that's the question. What is it?" He didn't tell her that the doctor had said Gwen was near the point of a complete breakdown. "Is it something I've done?"

His sincerity was a knife in her heart. "Oh, no," she said. "No, no, no."

"Well, you're not to worry. I'm going to take good care of you."

He did. At home, Sam, lonely with both Mandy and Satan gone, met them with happy barks and jumps and frantic, energetic runs around and around them as they went toward the house. Inside, George led her to bed and tucked her in. He set the timer on the clock radio for her pill time. She was on a rather powerful tranquilizer which made it easy to lie in bed and sleep. She lost track of time. The windows were open to the spring air and it was balmy and lovely. The tranquilizer allowed her to think, but killed the pain of thinking.

"Why was the shotgun in the living room, honey?" George asked. Had it been a day, two days? She didn't answer. There was no simple answer. "You were by me, Gwen. Do you know that?"

"Yes."

"Honey, we've got it made. We've got what most people struggle for all their lives. Really, most anything we want, happiness. I haven't taken a mistress or anything, and I don't beat you."

There was no way of telling him.

"If anything ever happened to you, I think I'd walk into the pond and forget to come out." George said.

It wasn't fair. She was being asked to live with what she'd become. She was no better than her mother. She'd given her body gladly and without envy. What she had done, hated and condemned, she'd become. And he was telling her she had to accept it, and live with it. Blind not to see how badly he'd be hurt, he was making it impossible for her to seek the easy way out.

She was dozing. It was another of those glorious May

afternoons. She woke with a feeling of violation and found that George had joined her on her bed. He was dressed only in a bathing suit and his hands were on her. His hands pressed, through the thin pajama top on her breasts where the man, whose name she didn't even know, had fondled her. 'Don't,' she said without thinking.

He respected her wishes. But he was a sensuous man and he had no idea of her state of mind. That night she persisted. It was George she told herself. Her husband. But when his hand went down to cover her femininity, to press and explore, she could not hold back a near scream. She jerked away, trying not to show alarm.

'Is that it?' George asked, not angry but concerned. "Is it the same thing?"

Why couldn't she just say, 'He's best for her, not teaching her. "Gwen?"

'You should find someone else,' she said. 'You're young.'

'Gwen, that's crazy talk.' His voice was strained. 'Dr. Brawn likes you. He thinks... She didn't want to hear. 'Well, Gwen, I would not be surprised if men, too, of perhaps need help.'

She seized upon the suggestion, not because she wanted to talk to anyone but because it would at least give her some more time to think. George drove her to the psychiatrist's office the next day. They had come from Ocean City to the uptown city past the high natural woodland. Dogwoods bloomed in some splendor. The world was redeemed, salt in past her eyes and bright colors.

It was by his insistence that George or Dr. Brawn or perhaps both had set it up. He had given no advance. He was taken back somewhat at the man with a hobby knife, whose face she could not see, but telling this nice man that she had committed casual adultery. She said banal things about being 'just with him' without knowing the reason, about the shock of the incident with the cat. He let her talk with little response, waiting for a long time. When she fell silent, he shocked her.

"Did you have the shotgun out to shoot the cat?" he asked.

"No," she said automatically. "Yes, perhaps. Oh, I don't know."

"Have you ever killed anything, Gwen?" he asked.

"No. Oh, insects. Plants."

He was silent, his head nodding. Finally, to break the silence, he asked, "Plants?"

"Isn't that silly?"

"Not at all. There's been some very interesting work done in the field. There are those who think plants have feelings, that they, for example, scream when they're plucked or broken." He was looking at her closely. "You've always been good with animals."

"Always. They seem to like me."

"Why, do you suppose?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think they can feel the love."

"And you've never been attacked by an animal before?"

"No. Yes. Once there was an opossum." She told him anything to keep away from the subject of that raiding on the balcony. She was not ready to face that herself, much less share the knowledge with another.

The interview seemed aimless and meaningless. She talked when she was primed with a question. She knew she was defeating the purpose and felt guilty for wasting money just to have a friendly chat with the doctor. She knew, too, that George must have mentioned she was she felt about sex, but the doctor made no attempt to open that can of worms. He merely smiled and nodded and talked about animals, and children, and plants. He was quite good, for, before the end of the hour, she was at ease with him. Feeling that she had been manipulated, she was moodily silent on the way home.

By a supreme effort of will power, she was able to perform her connubial duty with George, faking the response all the way and feeling virtuously noble. During her next interview with the psychiatrist, she brought up the subject of her dreams.

"Interesting," he said. "Why, do you suppose, are you having recurrent dreams of such a bloody nature?" She shook her head. "Have you ever seen anyone lose a limb, say in an automobile accident?"

"No."

"Have you read accounts of torture and dismemberment?"

"Oh, not really. I avoid such things usually. I guess I must have read about the Inquisition when I was in school. I can remember a few things about it and witchcraft, I mean the methods used against so-called witchcraft. They were pretty horrible, but it has no real fascination for me. I mean, if I were writing a book or something I wouldn't ask to be shown the dungeons and the rack and things like that."

The doctor took a step closer. "I understand that in some of the more primitive societies they still lop off a hand in punishment for petty theft." He stood over her silently and saw a shiver run through her. Yes, the American Indians were rather primitive. There was the particular case. A man was taken by the Apaches. A Kiowa brave's mother was kidnapped by Indians. She watched them kill all of her children except for one who ran away. Later she witnessed that child being tortured by having its body gashed with a knife. And she was forced to watch the torture of a young white man. He was tied up by thongs strung through the muscles of his arms and legs by forced to witness. When he tried to look away from the fire his head was pulled back by the hair. Then they cut off his nose and began cutting the stumps, at all times being careful to keep him alive as long as possible. He was looking at her through his eyes. He saw her tongue flick out to lick her lips, and saw her eyes narrow in thought.

"That doesn't shock you?"

"You're going to think I'm crazy," she said evenly, "but when you've had it happen to you, it loses its shock value."

"In your dreams, you mean."

"Yes, but it's so very, very real."

"Why, do you suppose?"

She smiled. "If I knew, would I be here?"

"In these dreams, are there particular people involved?"

She thought. "No. *They* are unseen. They are huge. They come at me and I'm unable to run."

"They? Men? People?"

"Yes and no. Things. Huge teeth. Metal teeth sometimes."

King grunted. He was eighty-two years old. A Freudian by training, he'd developed some rather independent ideas in thirty-five years of practice in an area of the country where psychiatry was not fully understood. He was recognized as an authority, was often used as an expert witness in court cases, and was consulted by physicians all over the Southeast. There was something about the girl which appealed to him, something which roused his interest. However, his eighty-two-year-old mind, although still sharper than many a third his age, had its moments of forgetfulness. There was something, but he couldn't place it. He had done his best, during that first visit, merely to gain a measure of ease with the patient. It was expected that the patient would withhold information and, as far as possible, the underlying cause of the problem. In past years, he had been recognized in his circle as one of the more patient men, willing to ease up on probing. But now that he was eighty-two, feeling time running out, each new case seemed to take on a sense of urgency. Dr. King didn't like unfinished things, for any of some future date about which he did not care to speculate. He would close his last case, wrap it up neatly, complete his report and file it and then go to sleep in his old chair and not wake up.

"You are much too pretty to be eaten by nightmare things," he said, rising with effort, grunting and straightening his old legs. "Please do me a personal favor and let yourself uneaten until you can see me next week." He motioned toward the door, indicating that she was to go. "See me if you like," he added.

George was in the waiting room. There were no other patients. He grinned and put both his hands on Gwen's head. 'Looks as large as ever,' he said.

Dr King was in the doorway. 'You have a seat, Chief,' he said to Gwen, 'while I talk with your husband. We're going to ask him to reveal all your weaknesses.' He chuckled happily. 'Actually,' the old man said when George had closed the office door behind him, 'I just want to ask one or two questions. For example, what does she do?'

'Like when I'm working or something?' George asked.

'Like when she's home, the chores and so on. When she has time on her hands.'

'Well, she paints a little.'

'Interesting. Is she involved with the painting?'

'Yes and no,' George said, thinking about it. 'She's not very passionate about it, I guess.'

'Get her other things to do.' He stuffed a hand down. It was past his wrist. 'How about children? Nothing better than a child for keeping a woman busy.'

'There's nothing wrong with either of us,' George said. 'At least not that we know of. We've been trying to keep from having a child for months now.'

'She likes animals,' King said. 'Get her a new puppy. A very young, sickly puppy. Nurse her back to health. Work, but nice work. It's easy. I can guarantee you two will have a child. Get some pets around here. Work her hard. Get her interested in as many things as possible. It is two parts of course, for me to offer an opinion but in countless women of her age there is [illegible] a tendency to grow lazy, mired in myths. They feel life is passing them by. They need things to do.'

'OK,' George said.

'How's your sex life?' the doctor asked bluntly.

'She don't complain about it.' George frowned in puzzlement.

'No,' King said. 'We have hit on it.'

'I suspected she didn't talk about it. She had some rather bad childhood experiences with her mother.'

"I don't want to hear it from you," King said curtly "From her When she's ready."

"I think she was considering suicide," George said.

"Why, do you suppose?"

"I have no idea Honestly, I don't Things are touchy with the sex but, but I don't push it."

"This is new?"

"Yes and no It took a long time, but after a while she seemed to like it sex Now it's back, and the old hang-ups."

"Be strong," King said with a smile "Don't push her Could you, by any chance, take a few days off? Take her on a trip?"

"Yes," he said, although his shop was filled with jobs

They took a nine-seat twin engine jet from the Port City, were hung up in a holding pattern waiting to get into LaGuardia, flew with the fantastic Manhattan skyline in their window for long lovely minutes Darkness came and the lights sparkled up to enchant Gwen into a state of dazed appreciation They moved at a hard pace for three days walking the halls of museums until their legs ached, experimenting with different foods and peeking into dark little shops buying George a new wardrobe at Lord and Taylor's, Gwen new things along Fifth Avenue The second night in New York was a nice one After wine, Italian food, and brandy, they fell into bed They were stuffed, tired, and full of talk about the eventful day Gwen made the advances and in darkness she was warm, playful, and responsive George slept peacefully Gwen slept so soundly that they got a late start the next day, for George would not wake her He sat in the chair beside the bed studying her peaceful face She was smiling No nightmares.

She was the old Gwen, even after they drove home late at night, with Sam crowded into the MG with them He was a paroled prisoner from the animal hospital where he'd spent the time being wormed, shot, bathed, and flea proofed, and clipped.

George remembered Dr King's advice He had got the runt of a Boston litter, a pup so small that it could not

comfortably on his hand. Gwen's motherly instincts were aroused. George protested playfully on a celebrate May morning, when Gwen served breakfast with the puppy tucked down inside her pajama bra for warmth and closeness. "That's my personal territory," he growled, tweaking the puppy's ear.

"Don't be selfish," Gwen said. "There's plenty of me for both of you."

"Slut," he said.

"Why did you say that?" She had stopped in mid-movement and was looking at him tense.

"Honey, I was teasing. That's all." He jumped up. He kissed her. "It's just that I'm informally married." He growled and chewed on her ears playfully. She giggled and pushed him away, but she took the puppy out of the bra and put it in its basket near the table.

Once, in Winston-Salem, Gwen had gotten the African violet bug. In accordance with Dr. King's advice, George brought home a dozen of the best plants from the local florist. He supplied her with all the secrets for African violet culture, leaves and sprays and rich potting soil. "I brought the place nearer a bed of greenery," he explained.

Dr. Peter Brawn and his wife were their first guests. Gwen did steaks and it was a nice evening. Then Gwen invited two of the Ocean City fishermen and their wives, and the talk was salty and centered on the latest Ocean City scandal just released from her second visit with Dr. King. She had gone alone, since George's work was stacked up. In the hustle of preparing meals they had little chance to talk. "I think he's trying to determine whether or not I hated my mother and father," Gwen said, with a shrug, when George asked her about the visit.

It is often possible to hide even from one's self a deep and disturbing hurt. So it was with Gwen. The Brown puppy, as yet unnamed, was not eating well, had to be coaxed to drink milk from an eye dropper. Gwen was busy in a flurry of spring house cleaning. In jeans and sweat shirt she tackled the windows inside and out, vacuumed down a few spider webs which had collected

in the high corners, scrubbed fingerprints from the walls near light switches, and cleaned the carpet with a sudsy spray can and a machine rented from the Ocean City Building Supply Company. She scoured the tile of the bathrooms with Lysol, getting all traces of mildew from the joints. George, pleased with her apparent sense of well-being, worked long hours and had no time for the great American cleaning operation. The African violets thrived.

"You're talking to them," George said, as Gwen muttered kind words one morning, feeding the plants which were lined up in the kitchen windows.

"Don't knock it," she said. "It works. See?"

Two of the plants were blooming. They looked healthier than when George had brought them home.

"Way to go, folks," Gwen said playfully, touching one of the flowering plants with a fingertip. "You are valiant and quite beautiful."

Lady, George said, "when those things start turning you on, out they go."

8

June is the greenest month. By June, growing things have usually done their annual bit, pines shooting up, young pines, green, fresh, three a foot. The annual weeds have come back, and woodlands which seem open in winter become tangled with verdant undergrowth. On George and Gwen's two hundred and three and a quarter acres, gentle rains and warm sun had created a jungle-like denseness. After long neglect, the cleared areas were grassed by bracken, young oak seedlings, tufts of tough grass and sprouting saplings. Small trees cut below the ground had put out new boughs. However, it was a tender young growth and fell easily to the whirring blades of the powerful mower.

After the hot job, George swam in the clear pond. He had picked up a face mask and a pair of flippers. He would dive for what seemed to Gwen to be an endless period, and then surface, puffing and blowing, as though not to her that she should see. It was not in the high grass. There was no breeze. Gwen allowed herself to be carried into the water, wading out gingerly. The bed of the pond was covered by tall, straight grass which grew a few inches into the shallow water. Here the grass was replaced by a soft, pulpy growth which stained the swimmer's bottom and, underfoot, was slick.

"Yuk," Gwen said, stepping gingerly. She fell forward, swam with an awkward crawl stroke. She was not a water baby. George dived, came up under her and pinched her on the rump. She squealed and turned toward the

shore, gained shallow water, and made faces as she waded through the slimy vegetation. "It feels as if you might step on a snake at any moment," she said.

"I think that's one reason why the pond is so clear," George said, his face mask pushed up on his forehead. "The bottom is covered with it. Out in the deep parts it grows three feet high."

"Yeech," Gwen said.

"But the water is warm, isn't it?" George said.

"Warm enough."

"Cheaper than a swimming pool, too."

"You can have it. It feels like worms."

"I tell you what. I'll clear a little beach for you. Cut out the grass so we'll have just nice white sand, and then cut the stuff off the bottom out for a mile."

"I sort of like it the way it is," Gwen said.

"But not to swim in."

"You can swim enough for me."

"Party pooper," he said, splashing her.

While George swam and dived, she poked her way gingerly around the margin of the pond. At the far end, near the low cattail, marsh area, she made a discovery. She squatted, making a pleased sound. The plant which had attracted her attention was unlike anything she'd ever seen. Several pulpy, pale green stems supported bright red leaves. "George," she called.

He swam slowly toward her.

An ant was crawling on the plant. It stopped and started, climbed a stem, seemed excited, darted into the red leaf. It crawled over a tiny black hair on the pulpy inside of red. In the blink of an eye, the plant moved, jaws closed, holding the ant inside.

"Yeah," George said, kneeling beside her. "Venus flytrap. How about that?"

"It just ate an ant," Gwen said, wondering.

"The law of survival," George said.

There was a colony of them in the low, boggy area. Dozens. Each leaf had maybe three hairs. George caught ants and dropped them into the traps. When the ant struck one of

the trigger hairs, the trap snapped shut in about a half second

"It's the oddest thing I've ever seen," Gwen said.

Reading about it she discovered that she was not the first to be impressed by the Venus flytrap. It had been amazing botanists since its discovery in 1760. Charles Darwin called it the "most wonderful" plant in the world. An old *National Geographic* article, dug out of the library's collection, explained how to keep the plant indoors. Gwen, having spent portions of several days observing the plants, decided to risk moving a few. She carefully dug out cored earth sections, the flytraps atop, and transplanted them into a large planter filled with the acid, boggy soil. The plants thrived. George captured house flies and fed the plants. An active fly could escape before the trap closed. George pulled off wings to slow the insects.

"Ugg," Gwen said, the first time he did it. "You're *that* sort of lad."

"Better I should poison them with fly spray or squash them with a swatter?" George watched a trap close on a struggling fly. "Buddhist," he said fully. "I'm your flesh-eating monster."

"Wouldn't it be great," he said later, "if they grew to tremendous size? Make a great science fiction movie. Huge man-eating plants. A beautiful dead beauty being engulfed in the closing red maw. I'd join in the [illegible] fighting with his muscles bulging to rescue the girl."

Gwen fed ants to the flytraps.

"Poor ants," George teased, remembering how she'd shuddered at his pulling the wings off flies.

"Poor plants," Gwen said, wholeheartedly. "These bogs are poor, not at all suited to them. They have to have their protein from the insects to supplement what they can get from the poor soil. Where they came from they didn't need to be carnivorous."

"What?" George said, looking at her.

"What what?" she asked, musing over the plants.

"You said where they came from they didn't need to

be carnivorous. Way I heard it, they're native to a small area of the North Carolina coast."

"Oh, yes," she said, suddenly bemused. "Did I say that?"

"You did."

"Hummm. Just the idlings of an idle mind, I guess."

George went on for a while. She looked into space. Why had she said that about where they came from? For a moment, at the time she had been speaking, she had known. Now it was not clear. It rather frightened her, for she had been in that instant a different person. In retrospect the feeling made her even more uneasy for a time before she'd been someone else. "Come here." She could hear the words in her mind and see the doubtful hopeful look on the meter reader's face.

"Is it normal," she asked Dr. King during her next session, "to feel, at times, as if you're someone else?"

"Why do you ask?"

She shrugged. She'd had the dream again for the first time in weeks. It had been an especially powerful dream involving dismemberment. She felt as if she'd better tell both George and Lassett.

"I don't know what it means," she said. "The other day I said something, that's all. Something which I wouldn't ordinarily say."

"Tell me about it."

"I was watching the Venus flytraps," she began. "I said," she paused. She frowned, trying to remember. Was it Venus flytrap? Or was it Venus's flytrap? She shook her head as if dazed.

"Yes?" said the doctor patiently.

"It doesn't seem important anymore," she said.

"You've discovered some Venus flytraps, then?"

"Yes. Venus's flytraps."

The doctor seemed to be lost in musing. Actually, his soft notes were working very quickly. Something had been touched. He wouldn't quite, accept. "Keeping busy, are you?"

"For a head shrinker," Gwen laughed. "You ask a lot of questions. I thought you were supposed to listen."

"When you're as old as I am, you get impatient," he

said "Especially when your patients won't talk unless primed."

"I've never been accused of not talking enough," she laughed.

"But about what?" He lit a long cigarette and took it to his mouth, shortened it with a long, deep drag. "Not about shotguns in the living room."

"You do get to the heart of things," she said, suddenly uncomfortable. "Would you believe that I was going to clean it for George?"

"No."

She'd been mostly successful at blocking out the entire afternoon. Satan, under observation in the animal hospital, was only days away from freedom and she just days away from what she knew to be a false delivery from a rabies scare. The cat had been inoculated against the disease. Moreover, she knew why he had attacked her. He had been protecting her. It was grossly unfair to put him in prison for fourteen days for having saved her life. Yet, without telling the entire story, she could not get him out. She'll make it up to him. Half and half instead of milk. Fresh hamburger. Poor Satan.

Kang was looking at her thoughtfully. She shifted in her seat and composed herself. It seemed, now that she had had a moment of temporary insanity. It was past. She had had only one nightmare reaction to the event. She was not so weak that she needed to see the her confidence by [illegible] sion. Wonderful as George was, he was human, and male. He could not possibly understand that her strange behavior had hurt her far worse than it could ever hurt him. So, she decided, let the hurt be [illegible]

"It's silly," she said. "I heard something. You know we're a long way from anyone. I heard what I thought was someone walking on the deck. I got George's gun and peeked out the door. There was no one, of course."

"Why didn't you say that at first?"

"I don't know," she said. "I suppose I was so upset by poor Satan's insanity when they put him in the [illegible]. She paused, shook her head. "Now why did I say that?"

"Why, do you suppose?"

"I have no idea, but that's what I mean about sounding like someone else."

"Who are they?"

"Dr. King. I have no idea why I said that. I'm not superstitious. I'm not having secret [illegible], black magic chat or anything. There's nothing mysterious about me. I just say things and I believe [illegible] I'm saying them." She smiled [illegible]. "I'm just losing a few marbles, not the whole bag."

"Don't try to cheat me out of my job not after these years, King said, smiling. "I think he explained it. I don't mind, and now my opinion is that it's time for his nap."

When Gwen was gone he sat heavily on the corner of his office assistant's desk. "You've read the notes on this case?"

"I don't read them. I just type them," she said. Ruth Hendrix had been Dr. King's assistant [illegible] years. Once in a great [illegible] her lines were backed up both of them should start [illegible].

"There's something [illegible]," King said. "I can't put my finger on it. Something about Gwen should be right here." He banged on his forehead with his palm.

"Eat [illegible] Grandma gets her teeth," Ruth said. "I can fix two as easily as one."

"Nice of you," King said absently. He tapped his thumb nail against his front teeth. "Ruth, when you're not busy," she said, "see if you can look back a few years. Something to do with talking to [illegible]. I don't think."

"You say it thinks. What is it?" she asked, rising to look up into [illegible] over her [illegible] lay [illegible] mutters.

"Hmm, I'd say. Otherwise I'd remember."

"Have you forgotten where you parked the car the other day?" She closed her desk drawer with a thump and looked at her watch. "And you're an hour past due for your heart pill."

"Hmmm," he said, absently, as she walked stiffly to the water cooler, drew a cup, and brought it to him, extending

the vial of small pills. "Yes, definitely something to do with plants. I'd start at I were you, with the old lies."

"You know the best cleanses up my senses."

"We all have our little crosses to bear," King said, heading for a nap on the big, black couch in his office.

9

It was too hot to clear brush. Moreover, the mosquito crop was a bumper one and large, yellow vicious deer flies added to the misery of being outside. Burning citronella torches and a hand fogger made the balcony just barely useable in the late evening. There, over tall gin and tonics, they watched dragonflies flit over the pond and threw peanuts to the fearless squirrels. George had arranged his work schedule to leave Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays free. On weekends they fished. George had worked on every piece of saltwater gear in Ocean City it seemed and sometimes he took out his favorite fishing trip to the deep green waters near the continental shelf where huge king mackerel and flashing dolphin made for some exciting moments.

In early July, he reported some small malfunction on an aircraft radio and was invited to take a spin around the area. He called Gwen, who drove the pick-up truck to the airport and joined him, taking the back seat in a sleek Bonanza. From the air, the most impressive thing about the island beach complex was the water. Next, the widespread activity connected with the construction of the atomic generating plant. Huge swaths of earth had been denuded. Around the plant itself hundreds of acres of woodland had been swept clean by the bulldozers. The cooling canal pointed a bare, straight finger at the waterway, halted there. On the ocean side, a breakwall

been made in the dunes. The huge spoil area, almost ready to begin to receive the dredged muck from the marsh, was a tremendous gash in the earth, bare ugly, holding blue-green water in the depths of the main trench.

But the islands were beautiful, looking clean and fresh from the heights. It was a lazy day and the pilot had nothing else to do. The air was smooth and there were no clouds. "You two in any hurry to get back?" he asked, swinging the plane upriver. The marshlands seemed to be mostly water. The lines of demarcation between grass and water clear, hard. The water itself was transparent from the air, showed shell beds, dark spots, a sunken skiff boat.

"Not at all," George said.

George and the pilot talked technical terms about radios and electronic gear. Gwen's ears cracked and popped as the plane climbed. She could see the coast. Pine Point City was up ahead. The pilot circled the city and turned inland. He was checking out electronic equipment. The earth below was veined with rivers, streams, roads and power lines which took huge cuts through dark green woodlands. Gwen was saddened by the immensity of the thing. She wished she had the opportunity to travel in time, to go back and see the land as it was when the virgin forests covered it. The neat squares of farmland seemed intrusive.

As the aircraft droned onward they approached an area of small lakes. Scattered, some almost touching, they were of curiously similar shape. "They're all round," Gwen said.

"Great," George said. He and the pilot had been ignoring her.

"The lakes are all the same shape," Gwen said.

The pilot twisted his head, the wing his way so he could look toward her as she sat in the rear seat. "They say they were built out in a meteorite shower. Actually they're not all round. More egg shaped. But in general they're

like shell craters, a hole blasted out by an explosion."

"Isn't that funny?" Gwen asked. "Our pond is shaped like them."

"Ours would have been a dinky little meteorite," George said. "We should have put in our order for a bigger one, then we'd have a lake big enough to water ski on."

"I'll hop back a few million years and steer you a good one in," Gwen said.

"Now, on this frequency," the pilot said, switching the subject, "we get—"

Gwen, dismissed from man talk, contented herself with looking. The plane was making a bank. Soon she saw the ocean. A cloud bank was building far out.

That night, showers moved in from the sea with thunder and spectacular sheets of lightning. They watched the storms from the living room over gin and tonic, piled onto the rug. George topped off the evening with the Casadesus family playing Papa George's *Concerto for Three Pianos and String Orchestra*. The airconditioner was laboring. It was cool enough, however, to cuddle, without sheet. Gwen slept in a pajama top, George in full-color nudity.

The dream was back, in altered form. The pain was a rending one, not a swift, cutting pain. It was brutal, all-powerful. She fought it in her mind, tried to say to some one could not even awaken and thus drive it away. Behind the pain, the rending, tearing, brutal power, was something new, an awareness, a wistful memory almost touchable but not quite. Waking, finally, she tried to analyze it. Her memory held tantalizing glimpses of a parklike expanse, of growing things, but nothing she could identify. Strange. A feeling of eternal peace.

The dream became recurrent. First there was raging pain, and then that glimpse of heaven and peace. She was still having the dream when she kept her next appointment with Dr. King. She did not mention it. Instead, feeling

that she had to give him something she talked about her mother. "Ah," he kept saying. But Freudian nature gratified. He felt that at last they were getting down to it. "Ah, ah, I see. Why, do you suppose? Yes. Go on, please."

George had come with her this time. She'd asked that her appointment be changed, for that week only, to Friday since he needed to make a trip to the city for supplies. He came in just as the interview was over. Ruth, the white-clad, wrinkled nurse with the silvery hair, said, "They're finished. You can go on in."

Gwen and Dr. King were making about the next appointment. George, not wanting to intrude, looked around the office and spotted something he liked. "Fantastic machine," he said, when the appointment time was settled and Gwen was gathering her purse and straightening her skirt.

"Oh?" said King. "You're familiar with a polygraph?"

"Not really," George said. "I've read a little about them."

"King's fable," she corrected him. "No experiment has ever hasn't worked since I began it. He chuckled. "Of course, my experiments with it so far have been with myself and with my office nurse." He looked at her. "Perhaps we don't get good results because we're both so old we have no secrets."

"I would think that the operation has a lot to do with the operator's knowledge," George said diplomatically. "Not that I'm saying you don't know how to operate it."

King chuckled again. "You may be right. But I do think there's a certain aura. I'm waiting for the famous man to come. He makes rectangular tracks in the area to service the various police gadgets, but trying to get him to make a special trip is, I've found, impossible."

"My husband can be a shrinking recluse," Gwen said.

"Oh?"

"Well, I don't know anything about this particular machine," George said.

"My main interest is in the movements of electrodermal

currents," King said. "I bought this expensive toy thinking that I would prove some theories I have regarding emotions. But the electrodes here give absolutely no readings."

"Well," George said, "the principle behind the thing is simple. If I had the schematics—"

"I think, yes," King said, digging into a drawer, coming up with a thick book of electrical diagrams. "If these mean anything to you."

George thumbed through them and found the one he wanted. He furrowed his brow in thought. "Couldn't be but one or two things," he said.

"Young man," King said, "if you could fix this diabolical thing I'd be forever grateful."

"Well, I don't have any equipment here," George said. Gwen could see that he was interested. Being able to put his hands on a new and complicated piece of electronic gear was pure bliss to George.

"Take it with you. It's taking up space, gathering dust. I used to have the run of this place." Dr. King glanced at Gwen. "Where it is now the sand gets in my eyes at times. I close the blinds."

"I can come over in the pick-up," George said, he told Gwen.

He did. He arose early the next morning, leaving Gwen asleep, with a note on the bedside table. She was awakened late by the growl of the heavy equipment. At first, she thought it was across the waterway, where the cranes and drag lines and earth movers were piling a half-mile-long dike to hold stinking marsh mud. Then she realized that they were closer. Sick had the cream ale. She was not refreshed by her night's sleep. She dozed. She awoke screaming aloud. She had experienced the most horrible dream: having her upper torso twisted and ripped away from her lower body.

Two big Cat bulldozers had been moved onto Pine Island. There was plenty of time. Two could do the job nicely, since there was only a half mile strip of woodland to be cleared. It would take months to dredge the canal across the marsh. The operators were buddies, who had

worked for the prime contractor of the generating plant for two years, having signed on as heavy equipment operators at a job in Texas. The job followed the construction jobs since Billy Dawes was twenty-five and unmarried, a handsome young hairy husky kid from Dallas. He liked women, booze and hunting quail about in that order. He had a way with all of his pet hobbies. His buddy, Jock Peebles was a year older, more quiet but able to kill a fifth of bourbon and still function. Billy was more at ease with the girls and had teamed up both of them with a pair of sisters in Port City. He got Jock's pants the first night by promising to move her forever and take her with him when the job was done. There was no real danger in making the promise because the current job was good for three more years.

Billy and Jock shared a mobile home parked on the far side of Ocean City in a new trailer park. Doris was an old gal from Tennessee three months too late to keep her husband a week on the night shift who had been giving Billy the eye. He offered her a hundred dollars for her pants with Jock but had to be in her pants within three days.

Surveyors had been through before the dozers. The outlines of the lots were there. Boundaries had been cut in the brush along the lines and you could stand on one end of the area and look all the way through along the surveyed lines. Since it takes room to work a big Cat, Jock went crunching around from the beach road clearing Billy a start on the area. Most of the trees were small, and you could push up a helluva pile of them with one straight run. Now and then Billy would come on a bigger one and these he liked. He would plow into a huge pine with the blade raised a couple of feet, nuzzling with a jar which he felt all the way to his back, the tracks digging and then spinning as the big bird fought back. It was Billy thought, having had much the same sort of experience just a few months back, sort of like a dentist pulling a stubborn

wisdom tooth. He had to rock the bastard, pushing and loosening, then the big push and the tree's tap root snapping below ground, sometimes with a crack that he could hear. Then the whole thing would come out, caught on his sharp dozer blade, to topple with a hissing fall, and then a big whooshing crash with limbs breaking and pine cones flying everywhere.

Pushing a Cat was good loot and it paid for a lot of good booze and bright presents for reluctant women. Billy was good at it. He was better than Jock and Jock was a damned good Cat man. But Billy could outwork him and did with regularity. In no time, he had a cleared place, raw earth torn from roots bleeding sap. He then began to push the fallen trees and brush into the cleared area. After it dried a little, the laborers would come around, douse it with gasoline, and burn it. Fresh-pushed trees were the devil to burn. It took days and a lot of gas to do it.

Billy figured he and Jock could make the job last two weeks, if they paced it. It could have been finished in ten days, but then they'd have to go back over the creek to work with that bastard foreman who one day was going to get his teeth altered by Billy's fist. He would be glad alone, just him and Jock in the woods, with the big cat growling and heating up. Sweat began to soak through his denims, broken branches and pine cones falling to plop on the top of his protective cage.

Billy saw the girl just before he was ready to knock off for lunch. He was working out in the area of twisted, small oaks and his mind was on the cans and the sandwiches in his lunch pail. She was standing in the edge of the growing cut area, under a pine. Her [illegible] crossed in front of her so that he couldn't tell whether or not she had a good set, but she looked good. Her hair was neat and done up in one of those sophisticated, simple buns. Her legs, encased in [illegible] good. He couldn't see her face [illegible] faces didn't mean too much to him, just so the [illegible]

need a paper sack to put over them. She was still there when he made a turn and pushed a pile of fallen trees into the growing mound at the center of the cut.

He'd been saving a big oak. He'd cleared around it, because it was a monster and would take all the Cat could give. He wanted room to work it. He was used to having people watch him work the Cat. People were fascinated by power. Girls liked dozer operators, maybe because they thought some of that power was transferred to their loins. So he was driving his rig and putting on a show at the same time, when he rammed the big oak, causing it to shiver to the top of its hundred-year-old mass. Man, it was a monster. It fought and fought, but the power of the big Cat was just too much. The tree dropped a few brittle limbs on him when he hit it hard, the limbs crashing and crunching atop his protective cage, but in the end it went over, with a groan of splintering wood which could be heard over the roar of the big diesel engine. The big beast swayed on its enormous haunches. They sank under the weight of the tree, then it was down, crushed, smashed flat. Bam, it was over toward where the girl was standing. As he watched, she turned and ran, disappearing into the woods, but not before he saw enough of her to see that she was a beautiful girl. She had a fine body. He didn't say anything about her appearance to Jack. He'd learned to keep such observations to himself. While he'd like to meet her, she'd been out peering through the trees at him for hours, the latter. At any rate, **he'd be watching for her.**

Gwen had been drawn to the canal cut by the noise and by something else, a tingling sense of something drawing closer. It was just two rebounds to death, that feeling, but she'd been addicted by what she saw. It reminded her of the air view of the area. Hundreds of acres of former wetland now bare and blowing sand. When the big oak went down she felt like weeping. A hundred years to grow, with living generations of man surviving hurricanes, drought, fire. It took the machine about

ten minutes to negate a century of growth. She was moody and hot after her walk through the woods. She walked to the clear pond and pulled off her shoes. The water was delicious on her feet, but she did not even consider a swim. Without George around, the pool looked deep and lonely. George's swimming activity had flattened the tall grass at the edge of the water. She sat down, feeling a slight dampness on her seat. She splashed her feet idly, trying to dispel the gloom. The roar of the heavy equipment, at least of the bulldozers nearest her, was silenced. Nature, however, is never totally silent. She heard birds rustling the leaves in the uncleared areas, a squirrel calling, the caw of a crow, and the lovely trill of a mocking bird. Gradually, a feeling of contentment came over her.

She'd had a nice long session with Dr. King, talking freely about her mother. She decided that she felt better, understood the woman more, although the doctor had not done any more than George had done. He had mainly just allowed her to voice her opinions.

"You know," she told herself, "you've really got it made."

At their age they were unusually secure, thanks to George's father's belief in insurance. George liked his work. They had a beautiful home. There were dark areas in her life, but a memory spasm of red had negated one of her most awful worries. She was not pregnant, by the meter reader.

It was really unbelievable, that thing that had happened. If she lived to be a hundred, she'd never understand her actions, but there, in the hot sun, with the cool water laving her feet, she no longer felt [illegible] about it. Desperately sorry, yes. She thought she'd give her right hand to erase that event. Then she wondered why she thought of that particular old bromide. She shook her head. She didn't want to think of unpleasant things, in dreams for example. She felt that she was on the way back and was going to beat it, whatever it was. It was only

to accept the Freudian thing and blame it all on mama. She had so much that she was not going to throw it away, a great man, a fine [illegible] and another [illegible] husband —taking the meaning of the word both ways.

She lay back and covered her eyes with her arm. It was so peaceful there. She was dozing when the helicopter started work again. The metallic roars caused her to frown. Even that would pass. People had babies and the babies grew up and used electricity. There had to be power plants or the race would go back to cave-man living and she would not have [illegible]. She had had a nice stereo set with records which turned her on. And the electric cooker, and washing and ironing and all that. It would pass. She passed her hand over the back of her mind and tried to regain that drowsy sense of well-being.

She thought of the pond as it once was. Vast huge trees never touched by saw or axe. Their roots would have sent off the floor of the forest from the sun and left a moist, shady carpet where the mold of their rotted parts, straw and leaves [illegible], cool. It was a [illegible] thought. She never seen a virgin forest, only [illegible] with thick undergrowth and weak plants. She imagined the forest of those huge trees, past and [illegible] far back that look through the eons to times of great ferns and strange, [illegible] animals.

Something crawled on her foot. She kicked and looked down. A pulpy ruin of the water plant which covered the bottom of the pond had settled across her instep. She shifted in her chair to the very edge of the water, and yawned. The sun felt so good, the water so cool. An image. She like a plant would send the tap root into the wet earth. She [illegible] into the water, spider-web to feel out. Wet words [illegible]. Arise. A giant shape [illegible] with [illegible] arms [illegible] shout of [illegible]. Arise and go [illegible] but [illegible] all sorts [illegible] that after [illegible] Sequoia. Hundreds of

years old. A line from a song: *"and if you could speak what a fascinating tale you could tell."* She would want some defense, however, so that when the loggers came she could drop a bomb on their heads. Well, they'd just build cages to protect them, like the bulldozer operator.

Idle mind, idle thoughts she told herself, thinking about going inside to have a bite of something or to paint. But she was so lazy.

There is a delicious feeling of contentment when one falls asleep slowly for a practice nap. As she shaded her eyes from the sun with one arm, she thought, If I could be this sleepy when I go to bed I'd never dream. Pure luxury. Letting the eyes close, the lids so heavy, so heavy. And half-sleep, an awareness of sounds but as if they came from a distance. Comfort. Lazy comfort. Peace. Around her the living things were known, friendly and symbiotic. Sharing things: the profusion of flowers, the rich fruit given freely. She, herself, knowing the goodness of the rich earth, yet mobile, returning to it for health and sustenance. At the end of the day, planting herself, roots back to the rich earth. Feeling. An awareness of pain and fear. It was a beautiful dream and it was real and the landscape was eerily familiar, yet strange.

She felt heavy and ripe. It was a good, natural feeling. A bee buzzed on a wee flower near her ear. Birds called and a mosquito whined near her head but did not bite. She sat up, feeling angrily at pins. Her clothes constrained her. She loosened her bra and felt it open at the waist. The sun felt good on her bare skin. She wore a small, natural feel treat bra. She felt like crying. Then, when she breathed the air it was so pure, so delicately flavored with the sweet oxygen given off by the growing things around her.

A noise at the far end of the pond caused her to turn her head, not in panic, in interest. Lowly Sam started barking. Two teen age boys came out of the brush to see her, halted to look at the pond. Ripe, swollen, heavy

Good, natural. She stretched, pushing out her breasts. She raised a hand, waved at them. They saw and waved back, hesitantly.

"Come here," she called, just loudly enough to be heard.

They consulted, moved slowly around the pond. She waited, ripe, mellow, natural.

"No." She heard it deep inside, a small voice. "No." That part of her knew, recognized the feeling of interest. That part of her screamed, protested. The two boys, one lithe and handsome, moved toward her, walking slowly around the far end of the clear pond.

"I won't," she whispered. "I will not."

She was talking to someone or something. She couldn't see or hear that someone or that something, but it was there. "I won't."

"Yes, yes," the very air seemed to be saying. "Yes," inside her. "Open yourself here, to me," on the grass.

They were fifty yards away, nearing her. She shook her head, fighting the enveloping desires, the ripe, mellow, sweet warm yes of the power of knowledge. If she yielded to her impulses, she could have the world, have it all.

She, panting, sweat on her forehead, and her seamless sweater, breasts were exposed. They came to see. "No, please," she begged. "No."

There was an explosion. It was so frightening that she screamed. She stood, hands, breaking the silence. The two boys halted. The air that was suddenly tense, vivid. She screamed again, and the two boys broke into a run, one left, one right, into the brush. She stood, breathing hard, tears wetting her face. "No," she said. "Oh, no."

Then, in sudden contrast, the scene of pure bliss, endless peace, tranquility, heaven. Strange, overwhelming. The moment of terror was wiped away. It was as if it had never happened. She saw the antlers. She had a choice, but that choice did not include inactivity. And to drive home the point, she was swept with unbearable

agony, terminal agony, twisted, torn, and rended, her limbs being shattered. It was only a moment, but in that terrifying moment she saw more and understood more and knew, with regret and a sweet, unreachable sadness, what she must do.

A quick summer shower crossed the island as George came home. As he entered the drive, the windshield wipers making rhythmic sweeps, he saw Gwen, her blouse open, her hair wet and streaming down her back, standing down by the pond. He was dry, but he would have to change from his work clothes anyhow. It was a warm, pleasant summer shower, so he ran through it and yelped at her. She turned around and smiled.

"Hi, nuthead," he said, gathering her into his arms. **"Why the rain act?"**

"It feels good, doesn't it?" Rain ran down her face. She licked at it with her tongue. "I haven't walked in the **rain in, oh, years."**

"Ever screwed in the rain?" He pinched her breast through the wet tricot bra which showed the outline of a **nipple.**

"No. You?"

"Come to think of it, no." He was grinning. He was pleased. She looked better, happier, more herself than she had in weeks.

"Well," she asked, giving him her sexiest look. **"You're kidding."**

"All snow and no go," she said.

"A Ferrier never lets a dare go by," he said, starting to strip the sodden clothing away from her.

Her healthy skin beaded the rain at first. He looked at her, entranced. His Gwen, the nut, the prude, was naked in the open, laughing in the rain. Honey, he asked, the sight of her turned him on.

'Yes,' she whispered through the rain. 'Yes, strong.'

He couldn't believe it. He made a mental note. Have

his fortune to the study of psychiatry. He blessed Dr Irving King as she clung and pulled. He g[illegible] as he arranged their sweaters [illegible]ning on the gra[illegible], and then it was a serious, beautiful thing with a wildly responsive, willing wanton woman wanton just for him, loving his touch, and saying, 'Ah ah ah,' with his penetration. George was a happy man. The union was quick to violent y active. Finished, he saw love and laughter in her eyes felt his own lafter overflowing.

"God, you're sad," she said, pushing him off and running with him giving chase, to splash nearly into the rain-dimpled clear pond.

Inside, after a hot [illegible]wer a maid had left with fresh towels, a drink, and music on the player. It was as if it were only a momentary recess on her part. It could go back. As if in answer, she came to him, drawing down his lips as he sat in the big, good chair. George.

"Ummm."

'George.' A whisper, a sensual kiss on his cheek, a hand [illegible] things. Gwen's hair [illegible]

'How am I to the right place.' He [illegible]. He should not have said it.

"You're different."

"Like it?"

"God, yes."

He loved it. He liked it. He Gwen the wanton, sexy, endlessly hungry woman. As the days went by and [illegible] dimensions he began to hope. At first when [illegible] and [illegible] which, said as talking [illegible] on the beach, he'd say, 'Are you sure?' Then no longer to ask. It was a fortnight weeks. George loved his new wife more than he'd ever, ever loved the old one. He was a happy man and she was happy and [illegible]

'I just don't understand,' he said, making one last try to figure it out.

I don't know, really. It just came to me. All of a sudden I said Gwen, listen to me, you know you're a big girl. He's your husband and he loves you. Give, baby.

She giggled. "I find giving to be, frankly, one hell of a lot of fun."

So he accepted it and was happy. He would be one happy fellow right up to the day he died.

10

Billy was working the inland side of the cut. Jock, his friend, was on the ocean side. There was a buildup of clouds to the west, indicating a short work day. Billy was rooting for the clouds. He'd had a rough night. First, he and Jock had stopped by a joint on Ocean City on the way home, punched a few coins into the juke for a couple of country-western goodies, shot a few games of bowling on the little game machine, and put away a few tall ones. Back at the trailer, Billy had been restless. Jock was out of it. He could hold his booze, but beer did him in and made him sleepy. He'd hit the sack just after dark, leaving Billy on his own. He considered calling the two sisters, and entertained a delightful vision of sinking both of them into bed at one time. He had to walk all the way to the office to use the telephone. The aged, short, tar-wrinkled mother of the two sisters answered and said, rather curtly, that her daughters were not in. Billy said to hell with it and walked back down the line of trailers, kicking at the bare, white sand.

The Tennessee girl came out of her trailer just as he was out front. She had her blond hair piled up high in a beehive. She wore slacks which showed the outline of her panties and the firmness of her fanny. Jesus, she was a piece.

"Evenin'," Billy said, giving her his best smile.

"Hi, yawl, Billy." She was walking right toward him, her big set bouncing inside a little knit thing.

"Where you off to?" he asked, seeing that she was

headed toward her new Ford. He stood in front of the car door to block her.

"Outta cigarettes," she said. She was, he could tell, well aware of the fact that he was looking toward her with more than neighborly interest.

"Your old man get off to work?"

"Damn right, shit," she said.

"Might ride along with you, if you don't mind," Billy said.

She looked around. The evening was a hot one and everyone was inside. Wind chimes and fans were running and pumping. "Well, I'm just going down to the store."

He walked around and got in. He saw, when she sat down, that he'd been wrong. She had on a bra after all. She just had a set so big that no bra could hold them. That was all. She smelled of a nice perfume and beer, the air conditioner beat down, he could feel heat in the car—a bit of good girl sweat.

The nearest store was on the outskirts of Ocean City, five or six miles up the road. Billy began his work immediately. "Don't you get lonesome as hell around here every night?"

"You don't have time to get lonesome with kids," she said.

"Seems for a good-looking girl like you, to spend every evening with no more company than a couple of kids," he said.

"Breaks of the game," she said, but she turned her face toward him with a quick smile.

Billy looked at the road ahead and she was giving all the right answers. When they got to the little service station and grocery store, he said no and so did she. She gave him a dollar for two packs of Camel filters and he came out with a cold six-pack. He went first class, because she was a pretty classy broad. He bought one of the more expensive brands.

"Christ, yeah," she said. "Hit the spot."

She drove with the cold bottle between her legs. Billy didn't want to cool off that spot. He had other ideas.

"Seen the dig lately?" He was referring to the huge excavation for the base of the reactors.

"Naw."

"Let's drive in and take a look," he said.

"Sam sees me riding around with you it'll be him and you," she said.

"He don't have to see us," he said, smiling. He pointed to a little lumber road as they approached it. "Take a right."

She did. His heart started pumping. He killed his beer and twisted the cap off another. She hadn't finished hers. He reached for it to test it and then, finding it half full, pushed it back down, with a little twisting motion, between her legs. The road ended at a temporary fence. "Can't see much from here," she said, lifting her beer after throwing the car into park, leaving the motor running. Billy reached across and turned off the key and doused the lights.

"Good view," he said. In front of them the tall buildings were floodlit. There wasn't a blade of grass, not a single runty tree between the fence and the installation. On one of the projects sparks flew from an electric welder.

"That's where Sam works," she said.

"Yeah." He moved in. When he pressed his flank up against hers she made a small motion to move away. She didn't have any place to go. He put his arm around her and put his other hand on her chin and pulled her face toward him. "I've been looking at you for a long time," he said.

"I don't mind looking, buster," she said, "but that's the end of it."

"Be nice," he said, kissing her. She went all wet and open, her tongue coming out. Then she jerked away.

"You crazy or something?"

"Crazy for you," Billy said, trying to put his mouth on hers again.

"Knock it off," she said. "I'm a married woman."

"I won't let that bother me if you won't let it bother you," he said, trying to put his hand on her and finding

that she had six arms to ward him off.

Sam would kill you," he said, fighting.

"You gonna tell him?"

"There ain't gonna be nothing to tell," she said, ramming an elbow into his gut, hard.

"Ouch," he said.

"You get over there and stay," she said.

"Now, honey," he said.

"I'm leaving," she said harshly. "You want a ride home you can, but you keep your ass on your side of the automobile."

"You gonna waste a beautiful opportunity like this?" He tried to put his arms around her. She put an elbow into his body with her closed fist.

"Goddamnit, that hurt," he said.

"Get you where it really hurts if you don't stop acting like a animal."

"Annie—" He felt the heat of anger. "Annie?"

She started the car. He had this huge want and she'd promised him. Her eagerness had been a promise. She'd led him on and now she was showing her true colors. A tease. That's all she was.

"You know you want to," he said, making one last effort.

"I won't deny it," she said. He reached for her as she started the engine. But I've got enough sense for me. I wants not to hurt me, and you're going to get yourself hurt if you don't get your hands off me."

"You want to," he persisted.

She drove home in silence, and he let his anger vent itself by closing the door with a force which he got out. So it was not to tell of a frustrating night. She wanted to, but she wouldn't. That wasn't what most women wanted.

He was mistaken about it when he saw the girl come out onto the edge of the veranda. He'd been watching the house for hours. If it rained he could duck into Ocean City and try his luck at the joint with that cute waitress. When a man is desperate, he's desperate and if there'd been an organized house in the little town he'd

have made plans to visit it that very night, but all Ocean City had was a couple of part-time hookers, and they didn't look too clean to him. He wasn't about to waste twenty bucks on something which might begin chewing on him before he even got finished.

Then the girl was there and she was in an outfit that knocked his eyes out. Hotpants and a low-necked blouse. He could see, even from fifty yards away, that she didn't have a set as big as the Tennessee gal, but she was making up for that with a pair of legs which looked good and that nice fanny. He kept his eyes on her. When she waved, he waved back. She stood there for a long time. The low clouds climbed the sky behind her.

'Nothing ventured,' he said. He cut the Cat's engine, leaving the blade up, ready to go back to work. He walked over the torn ground, lifting his boots over roots and broken limbs.

'Hey,' he said, "you look mighty lonesome out here all by yourself.' Close up she had a knockout of a face.

"This way," she said, turning without so much as a smile. He saw her fanny work as she walked away. What the hell? She stopped, turned. 'Are you coming?"

"Where?" he asked.

"Does it matter?" she asked, turning to face him and unbuttoning her blouse to show that she was wearing nothing under it. She let it hang open, showing a nice, firm set. Tender stuff.

'Honey, you name the place."

He'd heard of such things, but nothing like this had ever happened to him. He almost tumbled over his own leg as he followed her down into the brush along a deer trail. It was hot in the woods with the breeze blocked off. He didn't care. Man, after his great performance of the night before he was ready. And he couldn't believe his luck but he'd heard of such things women do to their men to beat around the bush. He followed. She skirted a little bay. The clouds were still coming. The sun went out and it cooled down. She pushed through thick brush and he felt back so that the bent branches wouldn't snap up and

his face. When he broke through she was standing beside a big tree which had been blown over in some past storm.

"Stand over there and take off your clothes," she said, pointing toward the root end of the fallen tree, a huge mass of dirt and moss and rotting wood. She didn't beat around the bush. To show that he was up to anything, he stepped over. The place where the tree had been growing was a big, round hole about four feet deep. There was water standing in the bottom of the hole. Bill wondered where she was going to do it. There wasn't enough moss anywhere to make a good carpet. He let the dirt rest. Looking at her bare boobs, he was not unwilling to screw her standing up against the tree, even if it did hurt his knees and make them tremble.

"Take off your clothes," she said. She wasn't smiling. Bill began to wonder if this were some sort of a test. He looked around. There were no sounds, save the natural **sounds of a woodland.**

"You first," he said. He wasn't born yesterday. If this was something special of the guys had to go for a thing, he'd go along, but he'd see the color of her money, even if they did come bursting out and start attacking. Then he'd have something.

She nodded, slid the blouse in one graceful motion. Loosened her hoopskirts let them fall. She had a fuzzy brown bush and sweet looking legs. She kicked the hoopskirts aside. Bill's throat was dry. He took a step toward **her. She said, "Now you."**

He grinned. This was surely the real thing. A real nymph, and those peckers were always hung-up about something, even if they did make good rocking when they got started. He took off his shirt and hung it over the fallen tree. Then he bent to take off his boots. His jeans were so tight that they wouldn't come off over the boots. He bent and tugged, and off came one boot. Then he lifted the other foot, still balancing and caught himself with one hand on the fallen tree. He laughed nervously. He'd taken his eyes off her for only a few seconds. When he

looked up, he looked into the barrel of a shotgun. The woman was moving closer.

'Oh, shi—' The spreading pattern of shot blasted the last letter of the word down his throat before tearing off the lower side of his face. The second blast eliminated his eyes. He splashed heavily into the hole.

Gwen padded over to look down on him. She sidestepped the bloody leaves. He jerked a few times and then was still. She leaned the shotgun up against the fallen tree and calmly began to push the bloodied leaves into the hole with a stick. Finished, she examined her work critically. There were a couple of blood spots on the tree itself. She cupped her hand, dug dirt after pushing the mulch aside, and rubbed the tree until the spots were obliterated. She looked at her darkened hand, wiped it on leaves, and dressed slowly. Then, using shells taken from a small bag hidden in the dead branches of the tree, she reloaded the gun and placed it in its original spot.

Jock, Billy's best friend, stopped his Cat. The clouds were on top of him and it was time to knock off. He heard only silence and knew that Billy had decided the same thing. He sighed, stretched, and lit a cigarette. He sat on the Cat waiting and after five minutes got off and took a long, satisfying leak. Pushing a Cat worked on the kidneys. Then he started walking around the remaining mass of trees toward the other end to meet Billy. He walked all the way to Billy's machine and saw Billy's tracks leading off toward the woods. He was headed toward them when the girl came out from under the trees.

"Hi," she said.

'Hi.' She was some looker. "You seen the guy running that dozer?"

"Umm," she said. There was a teasing little smile on her face. Jock couldn't believe what he was seeing and what he was thinking. Billy was a real cock man with girls. It wasn't Billy's kind of chick. This one was a real self-

'I saw him," she said, with what amounted to a knowing smirk. "He said I should see you, too. He said you would be nice."

Once in Dallas Jock had taken seconds on one of Billy's girls, a kid who just couldn't get enough. He was a true believer. Still, there was something about this girl. "You're pulling my leg?"

"He's down there waiting," she said. "He asked me to come and get you."

That damned Billy. Only man Jock knew who could find a piece in the middle of the woods on the run. He followed, his interest growing. The girl didn't look back more, but she spoke with the sway of her hips. Jock followed her down a little trail into thick brush and then into a small clearing beside a fallen tree. "Where's Billy?" he asked.

"I told him I didn't want an audience." She was undoing her blouse. Jock's throat constricted. He moved toward her.

"No," she said sharply. "I want you to take off your clothes first."

"This some kind of game?" Jock asked.

"It is." She dropped her hands, and he licked his lips and began to move toward her again.

"No," she said. "I want to watch you undress."

"You don't trust me, honey," he said, moving.

"Humor me," she said. "I have a thing about it."

He hated. She was just a few steps away. The hot pants of war drummed her senses. As he watched, she kicked them aside. She was taller, lither, sorer, a woman. "Stand over there where I can see."

He did. He leaned on the tree and bent to take off his boots, and he didn't even look up.

By pushing the leaves back from the overturned roots he was able to cover them. She put their loose clothing under the roots and then pushed the dirt and leaves back over them. She was a lazy worker, not disposing of the evidence as the books said. By the time legs and arms were tied in, then she covered the whole thing with leaves and dressed, gathered pine straw to cover the entire clearing so as to hide the foot marks.

Then she examined it carefully for blood and other signs and, satisfied, skirted the bay, gained the road, and walked slowly and tiredly to the house. There she got out the gun cleaning kit and scoured the barrels of the gun. She oiled it, put it away, and showered. It had begun to rain, a hard downpour which, she knew, would settle the freshly raked leaves in the clearing and eliminate all traces of her having been there. It was Friday. The machines would sit all weekend in the raw ugly cut. On Monday, there would be no one to run them. That, she knew, was only a temporary condition. There would be others. There would be many others. Too many. But for a time, at least, the pain was lessened.

She spent the rest of the afternoon sitting in the big room, watching the rain fall on the small shoots which were once again sprouting up in George's cleared area. Now and then, as if she'd heard something pleasing, she'd nod and smile.

11

It was one of the most beautiful weekends in George's life. Hot Jesus, it was hot. He spent Friday working, on one of his regular days off, getting out a couple of rush jobs, and then finding it surprisingly simple to repair Dr. King's polygraph. Just a bad wiring job. A cold solder joint. He traced the circuit, found the break, and cleaned off the bad joint. Then he soldered it and hooked up the gadget, after reading a few pages of instructions to a high school kid who likes to hang around and talk electronics. The electrodes were registering the movement of electrical currents on the skin, and George was pleased. He carried the machine home and put it in the big room.

There was a movie on in Port City which had received good reviews and was, seemingly, headed for Academy Awards. It was about a tough cop who called a spade a spade. George, a true Southerner, cringed when he read something about a black from Alabama. Blacks to him, were primitive natives of some British colonial country. I say, old bean, the blacks are restless tonight. All that sort of rot. He thought the movie to be refreshing because it called crime crime even when performed by a "black." George believed in law and order for everyone, saying after the movie, that laws held civilization together, defining civilization as those things which made him comfortable, relatively knowledgeable, and free to do things which pleased him as long as he did not intrude on other people's freedoms. The movie also pleased him with its direct approach to the drug problem.

"That cop wouldn't vote for legalization of marijuana," he told Gwen.

"We never needed drugs." Gwen said dreamily. She was snuggled in her bucket seat, her head back, listening to George with half an ear. "The air itself was wine."

"Boy," he said.

"I'm sorry. I was sort of daydreaming," she said, sitting up straight and touching his leg. "You must think I'm a real nut."

"Think? He laughed. "Honey, I know." He put his arm around her, and pulled her close—as close as you can pull a girl in a bucket seat sports car. "But I love you."

"Please go on loving me, George." The dreamy in her voice touched him. "I need you now more than ever."

"You've got me, kid."

She had been. It was wild and exciting and very athletic. He zonked off into sleep and woke to a perfect Saturday. She was bright and cheerful. The heavy equipment across the waterway was working, but the machines were down into sterile earth digging huge sand and gravel pits. Trees around the long, raw pit. He read the paper at breakfast ate too much and worked the crossword puzzle while she cleared the table. They worked their seats." George remarked that he should get around to clearing paths and having those horses. Gwen said she had all the animals she could take care of, what with Sam and the two Pups. She very carefully, as usual, avoided mention of Satan. The cat, cleared of the brain tap of rabies, had found a nice home on a dairy farm in the adjoining county.

The wild flytraps at the boggy end of the clear pond were seeding. Their traps were healthy red, and vicious. The inside plants were equally healthy. Gwen decided although the plants propagated best from root stock, to try some seeds. George watched her gather some of the egg-pint shaped seeds and said, "Those things have a fascination for you, huh?"

"They're unusual."

'That I know. They grow only in this small coastal section."

"Yes."

"Interesting to speculate why," George said.

"The soil is acid," Gwen said.

'This isn't the only acid soil in the world."

"They don't like to be too far from—" She didn't finish.

"From what?"

"Oh, I don't really know." She walked away toward the house.

"How did they get the name Venus flytrap?" George asked, catching up with her.

"Obvious," she said. "They're from Venus."

"Sure." He swatted her on her well padded fanny. "And in the books, it's Venus's flytrap, anyhow, indicating that they were named after the goddess, not the planet."

'There is a connection even there," Gwen said. 'Venus was not exactly of this earth."

'You are one spooky broad." George laughed. She glanced at him, her eyes hooded.

Inside, she stored the seeds. George stripped and put on a bathing suit. "Come for a swim?"

"I'll watch."

He hit the water on the run, knifed into it, splashed, swam, and bellowed at Gwen, who sat on the balcony. She had gin and tonic ready when he came dripping his way onto the deck. "Before the sun crosses the yardarm?" he asked.

Pleasantly potted, he moved speakers to the balcony, juiced the amp up to three-quarters volume, and blasted the woodland with the choral movement from Beethoven's *Ninth*. There was a breeze to blow away bugs. Gwen danced to "Turkish Bath," after George had his time of grandeur and went into something that just sat there and swung. After the walk in the woods, she'd changed to hotpants and the effect of her energetic belly dance was a good one on George. He smoked, enjoying the cigarette as only a cigarette can be enjoyed after a few tall ones, clapped, urged her on, and repeated the selection. H.

forced her to dance until she was laughing and panting.

Late evening. Unexpected company in the form of Peter Braws, his wife, and a nice young couple, relatives of Mrs. Braws. The bring-your-own-bottle politeness of the guests put plenty of booze in the house, and the party went on until late hours with loud music, laughter, and good feelings.

Sunday morning. Waking to find Gwen's soft moist warm body draped over his. A slow lingering morning love making and breakfast, with grapefruits of tomato juice and a quick swim and the sun and Gwen on a laughing mood. Sunday papers on the balcony in the breeze. 'I think I'll clear the beach for you.' George said, feeling the need for exercise after too much booze the night before.

'No.' The sharpness of it startled him. He looked at her inquiringly. 'Not today,' she said, smiling. 'I don't want you out of my sight today.'

'I'll just be right down below.'

'Out of reach then,' she said, coming to him. When her intentions became clear he groaned in mock agony.

'You're going to wear me out.'

She drew herself with her hands and lips. 'Complaining?'

'That'll be the day,' he said.

A thousand years of it wouldn't be enough. It was a thoroughly beautiful weekend. When the bugs began to take over at the evenings end, they went inside. George worked at a crossword puzzle. Gwen fed the flytraps raw hamburger. George looked up and noticed the rapt look on her face. 'I told you that when those nasty little bastards started turning you on then I have to go.' He wasn't interested in the puzzle. He rose to watch her. He passed by the polygraph. As he watched a flytrap closed handily on a morsel of hamburger he had a thought. 'It's worth a try, I guess. I wonder if it could be measured.' He set up the machine. Gwen stopped her feeding process and watched. When he started to hook the electrodes onto the flytrap she stopped him.

"You're not going to hurt it?"

"It's not alive, Gwen. Not in that sense."

"Don't hurt it."

'So, O.K., I won't hurt the little bastard."

He attached the electrodes gently. "Now, what I want to see," he said, making adjustments, 'is if the electric current registers when the trap closes. You drop in the hamburger."

The polygraph recorder leaped. "Something wrong," he said. Gwen dropped the bit of meat and the trap closed. There was a strong reading of current. "I'll be damned," he said. He moved the electrodes to another plant and Gwen stood ready. "Now," he said. 'Shit.' For there was another surge, just as he'd said "now," with the image of her dropping the hamburger into the trap in his mind. The movement of electronic current registered, too. He didn't begin to suspect until the process had been repeated several times. In each case his thoughts of feeding the plant his mental image, stimulated a reading much like that of a person showing emotional stimulation.

The bastards are reading my mind," he said. He had the electrodes connected to a different plant. "That's crazy."

'I don't know," Gwen said.

"Watch this." George reached for a knife from the cabinet. He held it behind him and approached the flytrap that was wired to the polygraph. 'I'm going to cut you into tiny pieces," he said. The recorder leaped, stuttered, and then began to draw a straight line on the paper. "Son of a bitch," George said. He reached out his hand and manipulated the trap, crushing it between his fingers. The action of the polygraph went unnoticed, for Gwen screamed and began to hit him on the shoulders, yelling "No, no, stop it." He didn't notice the recordings of the graph until he'd calmed her. At the moment of his manipulation, the recorder had gone wild.

'I'm sorry,' Gwen said. 'It's just that I've grown fond of them."

"This is too spooky for me," he said. 'The bastards

reads my mind. It faints when I threaten it. It goes crazy when it's hurt."

"Let's leave it in a cave," Gwen said.

"And you going ape on me." He grinned. "In love with a Venus-flytrap?"

"Silly."

"But it's damned interesting, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Let's try something else." He looked up to an African violet. The plant was due for water. He reached for a glass, ran it full, and started to pour. The reaction was much weaker, but there was a reaction, a movement of the recording stylus, before he started watering the plant. And when he thought an image of him, of burning a leaf of the lush plant, the fainting reaction was there. The stylus leaped, as when a human being shows emotional distress, and then it leveled off into a sharper line.

George had a new interest. First thing Monday morning, he was in the yard, the polygraph hooked up, and a tree. He stroked the tree with his hand. He tore a leaf from it with an ax. Since it was one which had been slated to be cut down, he drove the sharp blade into the wood deeply, then watched the green blood, as the pen recorded on the recording stylus, dancing.

"This is crazy," he told a watching Gwen.

"I could have told you."

"If I believe this, I can't mow the lawn, clear brush, or trim hedges. How can I, when even the grass cries out? This battery fainted when I came at it with an ax."

"You're beginning to understand," Gwen said softly.

"Not at all," he said.

He did some reading. He found that his discovery was not original. There had been work done in the psychic field with plants, and the results were the same as his own. The pioneer in the work, Cleve Backster, even used the same words in saying that plants 'fainted' when threatened. Backster, he found, had some pretty heavy thoughts regarding plants. His work, according to printed reports,

showed that plants appreciated being watered, that they worried when a dog came near, that they sympathized when harm came to life near them—plant life, animal life, insect life. Some of it was pretty fantastic. Backster said that fresh vegetables "fainted" when selected to be dropped into boiling water and that even eggs, without any indication of embryonic development, "fainted" just before they were broken. A North Carolina foundation had given Backster a grant to further his research. Backster thought plants to be telepathic. He was quoted in one article: "We're getting into another dimension, a scientific twilight zone in which something can go from point to point without going between them and without consuming time to get there."

"If I hadn't seen it happen," George told Gwen, as they discussed the articles, "I'd agree with the members of the polygraph association and call him a nut."

"They feel," Gwen said.

"Something," George agreed. "Do we give up eating tomatoes?"

"I don't know. It's not quite clear."

"Maybe you know all along," George said.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, you've talked to the African violets and the bastards are healthier than any I've ever seen."

"Just TLC," she said, trying to laugh it off.

"Think what happens when a reaper goes through a field of wheat," George said. "Thousands, millions of screams of mortal agony."

Seeing her shiver, he took her into his arms. "Look, this is all too heavy for me. I'm not going to give up greens and asparagus. I'm going to continue to keep my yard clean. Isn't it the same as eating beef if the plants actually do feel? We know a few foods fear the pain."

"I don't know," she said. "There is an answer, I suppose."

"Not on this earth," George said.

12

"Really, I think that it's foolish to go on spending money that way" Gwen was saying She'd spent Monday and Tuesday in peace, the only sounds of heavy equipment coming from far across the waterway She was clearing the breakfast table and George was finishing his second cup of coffee and frowning up at her "He's a perfectly nice old man He's a delightful conversationalist, but I feel as if we're paying money to have me listen to him talk and that isn't the way it's supposed to work Is it?"

"I have to take his machine back," George said.

"Why not wait until Friday?" she asked "You can drop it off and we'll take in a movie or something"

"Does that mean that you're not going back to see King?"

"Do you think I need to?" She stood behind him and pressed her breasts into his shoulders She'd taken to going braless around the house It was nice She was built for it and it was, for George, quite a novelty Nothing like being able to grab a loving handful of fitness unimpressed He thought it over She'd been a doll since the scary incident with the cat, no hang-ups, no problems

"Well, honey, we'll save that up to your" he said

"I think the main thing is that by talking to Dr King even briefly, I've been able to talk to myself I've learned a lot."

"Miracle cure," he said, turning to put his arms around her and pushing the side of his face into her stomach

"Buddy, if you're planning to go to work you'd better

stop that." He was caressing the roundness of her hips.

I really should,' he said. But I could be late.

"No," she said, laughing, pulling out of his arms. "I'll be the woman behind the man and send you off to conquer the electronics world."

'Or Sam Davis's ship-to-shore radio, as the case may be,' George said ruefully, kissing her and then pulling away to brush his teeth and gargle with a cleanser he kept in the She waved him down the drive and closed the door. It was that she wanted him to go. No. She wanted to be near him, always, but there were other things.

She waited for ten minutes, then more patiently just inside the door, ear cocked to catch the sound of the MG in case he decided to come back. Almost hoped he'd something. Then she moved quickly to the bay window looking the swimming pool. She turned back and walked down the steps, leaving her shoes on the decking. At the edge of the pond she hesitated and looked again. She was alone. She waded into the water inches deep, moving her feet carefully, slipping them among the plants growing with. Ankle deep she began to move her feet more swishing from side to side, then sank. With a sigh of she lay on her back, her arms hanging loose at her sides, closed her eyes, and lifted her face to the sun.

At the main construction site of the generating plant there was the usual bustle of activity: big machines, gantries, welders, trucks and workers. An official of the power company was looking after the inspector for the day, greeted the red carpet treatment by Jack Flores, the boss for the prime contractor. The others were in lightweight suits and hard hats. Flores, an older man, was in freshly pressed, khaki. The inspector had begun early and was being amused by a view of the entire site from a top the reactor building. The old man was impressed. Flores was pleased, for he was four days ahead of schedule.

When the others had seen enough they climbed down and got into a four-wheel-drive vehicle, Flores driving

He cut across the huge site, pointing out progress as he went, crossed a small highway under which the canal had been dug, a new bridge installed. Flores could see that the man was impressed. He himself always got a gut feeling when he saw a project really beginning to shape up. He'd been on some big jobs, but this one was a real gasser. He always felt as if he were back on the desert in Arizona, where he'd grown up, when he drove across the site and down the canal. The barren, roiled soil extended, a half mile wide, on a straight line arrowing for the ocean five miles away. Man, the shit had been moved, and the trees cleared and burned. Not a blade of grass was left standing, although it would grow back eventually alongside the cooling canal.

The dragliners were working, digging into the soft sand. The heat rose from them, and diesel fumes sweetened the air. Jack drove to the end of the current dig and they were almost to the waterway. He cut off through cut timber roads made it to the beach highway, and pulled off again to give a guided tour of the vast raw earth of the catch basin. Then he turned the car across the bridge and onto the island. He drove quickly up to the ocean side where work was temporarily halted and digging into the dunes. The equipment was there, untended, but then no one was going to steal a dragline mounted on a barge. He pointed out the cut where the canal would come across the island and bounced off into the raw earth toward the remaining trees.

He was a bit put out when he saw the dozer standing there idle. "Operator's taking a break, I guess," he said. He didn't really have to account to the power company man. The jerk didn't know from shit about construction. But when he was making a VIP tour he wanted to see men working, and working hard. "We're not pushing the contract," he said. "The big job is on the other side. I expect to be into the dredging of the main canal a few months. Lots of plenty of time to finish up over here, so we've got two machines working."

The other dozer was idle, too. Come to think of it, he

hadn't seen Billy Daniels's old car down on the road. Bastards were probably lying out drunk.

From the inland edge of the last remaining trees in the area to be cleared, you could see across the marsh to the high dikes of the holding basin. Forbes stopped the car and pointed out the route of the canal across the marsh. With his own clear vision, he was able to follow the line of survey flags all the way. While the power company guy was gawking, he walked to the dozer and put his hand on the side of the hood. It was cold. It hadn't even been cranked up, and it was well into the day, almost noon. Moreover there hadn't been anything more since the last rain. He furrowed his brow. There'd been a heavy rain on Friday. That meant Dennis and Pedro hadn't put a fuck of a lot of time in that Friday, hadn't been in to work at all on Monday or Tuesday. He'd hand-picked them for this job and they'd let him down, but there was no real harm done. He'd been parking off for long enough to know that Dennis and Pedro would be pushed by just about anybody when enough notice to mash pedals. He'd seen to it though that Pedro and Dennis spent most of their time as far away as they could. He'd put the worst men on those machines.

He bought dinner for the visiting team in town, dropped them back at the main office and went out onto the site. No point in trying to get any more done that day. Up the track the next morning. He went into his office and checked on the men's time sheets and cost breakdown that he would have to see him just before the Christmas break. His guess was that Dennis and Pedro would try to book a full week's work. Judging from the progress they had made, they'd been going great guns on their own time, probably thought they could bamboozle a little and get a few hours off that way. But at the end, when it came in with the job finished under the gun, they'd have to be straight about the time. He made a note to check their time cards on Friday if he didn't see them before then. Marshall had a meeting and one thing on his mind. He started on them one at a time.

The dozer started up at seven on Thursday, waking Gwen. The alarm went off a few minutes later, but she was wide awake, sitting up in bed listening. She could hear the muffled roar of the engine and could feel the results. She was preoccupied during breakfast. George asked her if she felt all right. She shook her head. "Just a little draggy," she said.

There was no peace. She stood ankle deep in wet sand, the water coming up to her calves. She swayed. The dozer clanked and growled. She wanted to scream. She wanted to move, to act. She was held back. It was too soon. There would be other opportunities for revenge, for trading death for death. Not now.

She stood in an attitude of listening, arms hanging loosely, face lifted, eyes closed. She swayed slightly. She tried to close out the pain with memories, but the magnitude of it was overpowering.

Don and Tommy Promer, brothers, aged fourteen and just under thirteen, had told all their friends about the crazy woman up on the point. First she says, come here, then she starts screaming. A real singsong. They'd talked about her a lot. They kept telling each other they'd go back up there and take another look. Hope her clothes almost off," Tommy, the younger said. "We could see her boobs." Actually, they'd seen only the tricot bra, but in memory it became bare flesh.

Both of them were large for their ages. Both were handsome, athletic, and tanned. They lived an ideal life in the summer, with water everywhere, fish plentiful, a boat always ready for their use, and summer girls all over the strand. There just wasn't enough time to go hiking through the woods, being eaten by yellow flies and mosquitoes, to see a crazy woman. But Don had stepped on a broken bottle, which some jerk had thrown into the sand of the Jones dawn on the inlet, and he couldn't go water skiing, the fish weren't biting, and it was too early in the day to go up to the public beach to chase girls. They rode their motor bikes to the point, left them at the end

brush, walked the road almost to the house, and then cut through the brush to come out behind the pond.

She was standing next to the water, no, in the water, with a dumb look on her face. She was wearing a bikini and, wow, she was stacked. They watched for a long, long time and she didn't even move except to sway from side to side a little bit. Tommy was spooked. "Let's get out of here," he whispered.

"In a minute." Don was taking off that bikini piece by piece. Since the pieces were small and just two in number, it wasn't much of a job. He licked his lips and set his fancy soar.

She could feel them. She opened her eyes without moving her head. She couldn't see them at first. Then she caught a glimpse of a white tee shirt through the grass. She questioned. But she understood far more now. Anything, anything to end the pain, to bring peace, even if for a limited time. She felt it rise in her, that familiar rush, swollen feeling. She felt herself expanding, her breasts full, the blood flowing into sensitive areas.

"Hello," she called.

"She's seen us," Tommy said. "Let's move."

"Naw, she can't see us," Don, the oldest, said.

"Don't be afraid," she called.

"Who's afraid?" Tommy whispered, but he didn't move.

"Please come out," she said. "Please."

"I'm getting out of here," Tommy said.

"I'm sorry I startled you last time," she called. *"Yes, yes, now I know. I understand."*

"Come over and we'll talk," she said.

"Don't," Tommy said, trying to hold Don down. But Don stood up, and she smiled and waved at him.

"Would you like to see me without any clothes?" she called.

The boys, Tommy standing now, looked at each other.

"See?" She had dropped the bikini top. "Come closer."

"What the hell," Don said, moving to walk around the end of the pond on the high end. Tommy followed, feeling a mixture of emotions, his eyes unable to leave the two

mounds. He tumbled down, not watching where he was walking. Don stopped a few feet away.

"Do you like me?" she asked, smiling.

"You putting us on?" Don asked, his voice uncertain. He had his hand in his pocket to hide his excitement.

"No, please. Don't think that. I like you. Please come here." She held out her arms. Neither boy moved. She pushed the small bikini bottom down and let it drop. Don heard Tommy gasp behind him. "I'll do nice things for you," she said, smiling and putting one hand up to cup one of her breasts.

Don had done it with a summer girl. Tommy had never done it, although he told everyone he had. He couldn't believe it. He'd never seen a woman naked, except in pictures. The girl was moving toward them. Tommy backed off a few steps. Don stood his ground, and when she kissed him and put her hand down and squeezed his penis, he gave up, stopped thinking that it was a trap or that she was crazy.

Ripe, full, the emotions so powerful that they cut off the sound of the dozer, the pain, everything but the ripeness, the mellowness. She heard all small sounds, felt the grass under her, knew the frantic, youthful strength, urged them on, teased them, took them. "I'll show you, little darling. Like this. See? Isn't it sweet?"

And, when, inevitably, there was no more strength left to give, when the two boys were dressing sleepily, feeling smug and tired, she said, "Please come back to see me?"

"You bet," Tommy said.

"Do you have friends?" she asked. She understood now. It was all right. Anything, anything to block off the pain, even if for a fleeting moment.

"Yeah, sure."

"Send them," she said. "Tell them to come any day but Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Will you?"

"You sure?" Don asked.

She laughed. "Well, not dozens at a time. One or two. Perhaps three."

"Some kind of nut," Don said, as they walked back toward the bikes.

"Who cares. Man, that was great."

"No one will believe us," Tommy said, after a few moments of silence.

"Who cares," Don asked. "How many times did you go?"

"Twice," the younger boy said. "You?"

"Three times," Don said proudly. "I'll bet I can do it four next time."

13

Jack Flores was one pissed-off man. It was getting to the point where you couldn't depend on anyone. First Daniels and Peebles and now Cramer, one of his oldest, most trustworthy men. He'd decided to put just one good man on the island. Even that would have done the job in plenty of time because the fucking environmentalists had raised a lot of new hell and had forced the chickenshit Federal people to hold up the permit on the marsh dredging until the school boys did another so-called Environmental Study of the fucking thing. That meant a thirty day delay in starting the marsh work, and he was about ready to start moving the dredges in.

It was one thing right after the other. A couple of drunk Chicanos over on the reactor had gotten into a fight over some local whore and had gone after each other with pipe wrenches. One of them was in the hospital with a concussion and the other was in the local jail. The bastard's wife, a cute little number, was on Flores's neck hounding him to get good old Pancho out of jail. "He's a good man," she kept saying. "He's never done anything like this before. That Negaires, he started it. My Pancho was just defending himself."

"Sure, sure," Flores said. "I'll see what I can do."

"He's a good man, he has children, he goes to church."

"Sure, sure," Flores said. "Tell you what, I'll send the company lawyer over."

"Bless you, senor, you are a good man."

All that shit. He thought she was going to try to kiss

his hand. He ushered her out and got on the phone to the office and gave the supervisor hell, wanting to know how much longer they were going to be tied up by the fucking government regulations. And on top of that Cramer's wife called every hour wanting to know why Cramer hadn't come home from work on Monday. Well, to hell with Cramer, even when Cramer was a good man. If he hadn't had a thing for a certain blonde, he'd have moved up in the company like Peters. He couldn't tell Mrs. Cramer that the bastard was probably shacked up with some broad on Third Street. No. And he didn't want to do old Cramer in. The man had been with the company as long as Peters had, and when he wasn't on the booze he was one hell of a heavy equipment man. But the sight of blush had pissed him off. Later Dunning and Peters had hugged it out without a word. The construction bums gave a shit. Peters wanted to get the job done. To hell with Cramer.

Well, there was one thing Peters could do. He'd given Cramer his chance. He could at least get the word out that the bastard was fired when he came back to work over and stole the watch he was going to get him. Peters would just have to do it himself. Back to the grueling pace of machinery on the job.

Peters had driven just ahead of the storm. He left the Bobcat at the Sand Castle and went to the bar with the rest of the crew to wait out the storm. The news was on the corner there was a corpse found on the beach and he was dead. Peters looked up from his glass and heard the Cat mowers all day. He was the last man to work when Peters arrived. The kid had to be waved down.

"How am I doing?" the kid asked, coming up to Peters. "You can go get me paid for overtime, Peters said.

"Well, I was going to go back and clean it up after," the kid said.

"Clean it up as you go," Peters said. "And be here at seven tomorrow, O.K.?"

"Sure," the kid said.

"You drink?" Flores asked.

"I've been known to take a drink," the kid said.

"You don't drink until you've finished this job, O.K.?"

"Well, hell, Flores."

"You wanta work for me, or anyone else in this fucking business you are a goddamned teetotaler until you knock down every motherfucking tree in this cut, you hear?"

"I hear," the kid said solemnly.

"You got a girl?"

"Now look," he began.

"I asked if you got a girl. You don't like my questions, there's the road."

"Well, shit. No, no one special."

"Just pick-ups. Like the rest of these bums," Flores said. "Well, until you get that cut clean, you're also not interested in girls, you understand."

"You're coming on strong," the kid said, bristling up.

"I have three good men walk off this job," Flores said. "We want pushers, but I'm going to see to it that we're not. We are going to put logs down this cut in a week and you are going to have it as bad as a whore's cunt after a case of crabs in four days, you understand?"

"Sure, sure," the kid said gently.

"You wanta pick up a little dime and a half, you work on for a while. Just turn it in. Ask Sal to help if you want. That is, if you're interested in making a buck."

That was different. The kid grinned. "Hey, yes. Thanks, boss." He went back to the dozer and was nearly through things up when Flores left.

The kid who had been ordered not to drink or chase girls obeyed part of the order. He didn't drink. He didn't care too much for it anyhow, unless it was at a party. But about the other, well, hell, when a girl comes out to the site in a set of hotpants and promises to take a ride if you go down into the woods with her, what can you do?

And while the kid was lying there, the shot missing his throat and knocking off his lower jaw, leaving him screaming through gurgling blood, and then he

wasn't dead after the second shot, but smothered under wet sand and waves). George was having a talk with Dr Irving King. He'd gotten involved in the previous Friday and hadn't taken the machine back to King, but this Friday he had to go into town for supplies and he carried the polygraph in the pick-up, and delivered it to King and then demonstrated that it was working. This led to long involved experiments with the equipment and he found that King was very sharp for a man who knew a lot about polygraph work. After a complete run-down on the machine and its various functions and after this was done in the grumbling office assistant, he used the machine to measure breathing, pressure and pulse for an hour while the doctor's nap time. George started testing King about his experiments with the police. King was fascinated. He asked technical questions and examined the gadgets which George had used. He'd been told a different point which was kept alive in the outer office by the office assistant and got some interesting readings.

When Irving King finally awakened from his nap he was so tired he felt as if he'd been pissed on. The assistant went in time for his next appointment of the day and he told the woman who was a first visit that what she needed was a nerve specialist not a gynecologist. You keep pressing the panic button and it gets depressed.

When George left King's office it was his private belief that the doctor was a bit of a fool. He took a look at the machine and noted that it was working perfectly and what he hadn't had seen on the polygraph, when George had asked one of the questions to be answered very interesting. It was very strange how it really excited him further. But it was eight o'clock on a Friday and he was tired.

Next day when George Lester Smart fixed the damned machine so that it was working properly. And as he'd promised Jean Lee Hunt he went to Jean's flat to try out the machine. She wasn't a mental basket case, but she needed help. But with a husband like George, she'd probably make it.

More interesting to speculate on those plants. Wild thought, to believe that they could receive thoughts telepathically. Opened up whole new fields of investigation. He'd have to write to Gerheart and see if he'd read anything about it.

"I'm leaving," the assistant said, sticking her head in the door. He waved impatiently. He heard the door slam and then he rose ponderously and tiredly, stretching and feeling the weight of his body on his brittle bones. Another day. How many more? Not enough, surely. Not enough to accomplish all that he'd like to do. There was the book, for example. Every headshrinker wrote at least one, and, although he was in an area where he didn't get too many glamor cases, he'd had his share of interesting ones.

He was still thinking about the book as he drove his big car slowly toward his riverside apartment. If he had time he would write it for popular consumption, because frankly, he didn't have the unique cases in his file to interest the profession, but he could wow the public with some of the sexual fantasies some of his patients had come up with over the years. Not exactly the height of professional ethics, but he wouldn't be the first psychiatrist to capitalize on the miseries of his patients to make a dollar. The woman who had literally split herself running an ivory elephant's tusk up her, ruin, a memento of an Oriental family. The young girl sent to him after taking on all of the local high school football team and then bringing herself to the attention of the authorities by trying to pick up Twenty three boys testifying that she'd told them it was their reward for winning the big game. Twenty three in sheer volume she was the sexiest thing he'd ever run across. Then all the hang-up cases like Gwen Nolan's spectacular there. But although it had never come out in his talks with her or in his chats with George Gerheart what the reason behind it all, the woman's attitude toward sex. Natural to be hang-up about with her mother taking her to exhibitions the way she did. Not natural for her to step out of an Odyssey and live a completely happy life after only three or four visits. But George had said things were going

great and he'd looked fat and sassy. No sexual frustration there, not in that boy. He literally glowed with contentment.

Speaking of books, if he were younger he could get a good one out of that plant business. Very interesting. The boy had invited him to visit and bring the machine and trout on the Venus-flytraps. He said there were chances there were spectacular. Might not be a bad idea at that. A day away from the office and the apartment would do him good. Where was it they lived? Somewhere over in Ocean County. Oh yes, on the island, Pine Tree Island. Nice name. He'd run down it before. A project.

Damn his failing memory. He was Rotten—he'd forget next morning. No, this was Friday. He'd work here over it Monday. Sure, he had plenty of time to go through his files. And there was that business something about Owen Farmer. She remembered him. Something odd. There was a lingering feeling of curiosity that it was something interesting. Wait. Mona Lisa. Had to ask her for some on Monday. He'd even write it down. Computer. Jotted it down although he kept a notebook in his coat pocket. Next step. He'd write it down.

At the next stop he retrieved the notebook, not as a car pulled up [illegible] two [illegible], two expensive loafers. By the time the excitement was over, he'd forgotten his notebook.

For [illegible] things were going to be too much for [illegible] it was [illegible]. Angst to temperature [illegible] sweating [illegible] for the show, and when he [illegible] it was hot on [illegible]. He was [illegible] looking [illegible] the event were the sweat evaporates as fast as it formed. He [illegible] was [illegible] looking team, both. Then you were [illegible] had [illegible] and [illegible] you and [illegible] and you survived. He was reading the [illegible] draft of a report by [illegible] time [illegible], a [illegible] P. D. in Oceanography, who had come in an [illegible] and [illegible] immediate superior was [illegible] across the

desk, drinking a coke and looking at Jack's furrowed brow.

"The same fanatics is selling us out," Flores said, throwing the paper down onto the desk. "What are we paying him for, to give the nuts more ammunition against us?"

"It's not all that bad, Jack," the supervisor said.

"Bad enough." He sighed, leaned back, and lit up a Lark. "Producing marsh, shit. What does that marsh produce besides marsh grass and mud?"

"We're caught in the middle of a fad," the supervisor said. "All of a sudden people are in love with every acre of salt marsh on the eastern seaboard. But I don't think we have to worry. The new recommendations should handle all the federal boys' objections. They want a change here." He stabbed at a map of the canal route, indicating a salt-water creek. "They say we can't run right down the creek line, that would be altering the natural flow of a navigable waterway or something."

"Listen, you can't get a rowboat up that creek except on high tide. And if we move over, we're going to take that tobacco farm here." He pointed.

"Actually, we'll be better off. The engineers have come up with some new estimates," the supervisor said. He smiled. "In fact, I was the one who told our tame senator to suggest that the creek was worth saving."

"Any particular reason?" Flores asked.

"When we move to the west, into solid ground, we're getting an anchor for the canal. If we come down in the middle of that marsh, she's going to be floating in the middle of a sea of mud. We'll have to go down thirty or fifty feet to anchor the dikes."

"Well, actually, it won't make much difference," Flores said. "We're not down to that point yet with the clearing. I can get the survey party out—"

"They're already out."

"Good."

"Go ahead with it, Jack. The thirty day injunction is just a nuisance, that's all. It should give you enough time to finish the clearing and get the diggers going. We'll w

get the go ahead from the federal people we can concentrate on the marsh."

"Right." Forres rose. He was already thinking ahead. He was halfway to the door when he was stopped.

"What's this about a gang fight over pirates over on the island?"

Forres said, "Goddamn." He turned. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Are you trying to cover up something, Jack?"

"Hell, no. I'm just trying to head some crap off. You know what a stupid bunch of shitheads construction bums are."

"I heard a group discussing it," the supervisor said. "I'm afraid you've got a crowd going who are not what they're not. The men are saying that something happened to the pirates over on Pirate Island."

"Yeah," Forres said. "I've got to go."

"Are you sure it isn't better to wait?"

"Hell, you can't run with two flat tires. Bill Cramer will probably be back. When he returns, give him the gravel for two weeks and then he's back to the old hauling. He can't work for another week. The tires were old ones." He looked at Hamilton's back. Then on the way out the door he added, "The kid had had an opportunity to pick up a gun, and most of every kid still carries a weapon. Some of them are good shots. That's why I'm going after it with the Sheriff's office without even turning in the time."

"What are you going to do about it?" the supervisor asked.

"Put two men on the pirates tomorrow morning. We're not pushing it very far."

"You should know we'd be a good deal safer if you sent a guard along?"

"Hell, no."

"The men—"

"They will do what I tell them to do," Forres said. "They know the country's full of construction bums."

"Jack, we're in the red on this project as far as accidents are concerned."

"Fights, stupidity."

"I don't think a man falling into the reactor hole was the result of a fight," the supervisor said. "And it was stupid of that fellow to get under a fresh load of cement, all right, but the fact is, we've had too many fatalities already. This company has always been proud of its safety record. We're able to get men with that record and I don't want it ruined. And I don't like the way those men were talking about the four fellows who have disappeared from the Pine Tree clearing area. I think I'd feel better if you sent along a guard."

"And admit that we think something might be fucked up over there?"

"What if we lose another man or two?"

Flores shrugged. "You're the boss."

"Not out on the site," the supervisor said. "But if you like, you can say that I wanted the guard."

"I could just tell them to work within sight of each other."

"Do that. And tell the guard to stay close to both of them."

Flores gave in. He was already wet with sweat by the time he drove back to the work shack and checked his boards. He made his choice, sent his notices, called security, and told them to detail a man to the Pine Tree site at seven o'clock. Then he ate lunch and drove over to check out the newly surveyed route for the road cut.

14

Tommy Promer, aged thirteen, held front stage center. He'd kept his secret as long as it was possible, because Don had told him that they had a good thing going and there was no sense messing it up even if she did keep asking them to send or bring friends.

You can only restrain the guys brag for so long without opening up to tell them that even if some of them are older they weren't always brains about it.

Don was off with a girl. Tommy had ridden his motor bike to the Leaning Pine Fishing Pier. The August night was perfect for sitting out on the end of the pier, in the glow of light from the last lamp post that hung to the ocean-moistened timbers. Waves broke with a hollow sound against the steel pilings as it passed. Waves that the strand Tommy used to watch the waves from the beach side. He spent a lot of hours on the pier, over the years, watching the waves and figuring out the moments that the next time he was down there with his surfboard he would know which one to take and when to duck under him. At night the waves looked softer and sparkly. The lights of the pier glowed on them and made them look nicer than they were and they'd disappear into the water between lamp posts and reappear as taken, near the strand they would bump up and get steeper in front and then fall into the white of surf.

A couple of the guys were out there, shark fishing with Tommy walked out, a coke in his hand. He saw what

fishy-smelling bench and watched. One of the guys hooked into a two-footer, a small one. Tommy leaned over the railing and watched, hoisted his Coke, tossed the cup into the sea, and offered comments as the shark ran and pulled the drag on the reel. It was a lazy, fine night and the talk after the shark had been pulled up, stabbed repeatedly, thrown back, was idle.

Couples, mostly island guys and summer girls, would walk out, say hi, stand around watching the last of action and then walk away. Guys began to drift out as the evening progressed. They'd made the rounds, failed to make a pick-up or weren't just resting and the whole group at the end of the pier gradually grew until there were eight boys ranging in age from Tommy's thirteen to about eighteen. One of them started bragging about a summer girl he'd just been out with. According to the way he told it, he was the world's best lover and the girl had practically raped him. Tommy snorted. After three trips up to the point he felt that he was a man of experience.

Once started, the talk naturally stayed on the subject of girls and, in particular, what girls carried on their pants and how best to get to it. Everyone, Tommy discovered, was an authority. One guy of about sixteen was telling how, once he'd done it, his summer girl proved with his cock until it got hard again. Tommy said, "There's a better way."

They laughed. Being the youngest, Tommy came in for a lot of kidding. "What do you know about it?" the last bragger asked.

"If she really wants to get it up fast," Tommy said, "she gives you a blow job."

There was laughter and general comment, the gist of which was that Tommy would go like a skyrocket if a girl even looked at his cock.

About that time Cowboy Gore came ambling out. Cowboy was an old guy, but he was nutty. His hair was gray and long and he smoked all the time, so that his fingers

were always brown with nicotine stains. He smelled like he hadn't had a bath in a year or so. Cowboy was always hanging around. He had a trust fund set up and some lawyer in town doled out a few bucks a month to keep Cowboy in cigarettes and pay his meal ticket at the little restaurant on the old boat basin. Cowboy had just enough sense to know that he could afford just about one six pack of beer a week if he wanted to keep himself in smokes. He spent a lot of time walking the roads to the beach picking up bottles and cashing them in for the two-cent deposit. He'd save his pennies until he had enough for a six pack, and then the six-pack would make him roaring drunk. He always wore a pair of boots and a hat, and that's why they called him Cowboy. He was sort of a town clown, and the younger boys found him useful sometimes, for the merchants all knew him and would sell him beer. He'd go in and buy a six-pack for you if you gave him one. He was always hanging around and they didn't mind, because he just listened most of the time. His mind was so weak that he couldn't follow most of the talk. He leaned on the railing and smoked, drawing on the cigarette with wide, Hollywoodish gestures.

"You ever had a blow job?" Tommy asked the loudest laugher.

"One thing for sure, you haven't," the older boy said.

"Wanta bet?" His very smugness made him sound truthful. For once, they listened. And as being front stage center for once told them all of it. He told it so convincingly that there was silence after he was finished and then some great laughter. The laughter was subdued because Tommy had told it so well there was a sticky, musky feeling in the air.

"You've been reading dirty books," said one of the older boys. There was, however, no conviction in the voice. There'd been a ring of truth in Tommy's story.

"He's right," Cowboy said. It was so rare for Cowboy

to talk that they all looked at him. 'He's right."

'You tell 'em, stud,' someone said trying for a laugh.

'You just go up and you whistle,' Cowboy said.

There was a chorus of catcalls and laughter. Cowboy looked disturbed. He worked his face trying to find words.

'Boy if she'd take on me Cowboy I don't want any of that,' someone said.

'She's pretty,' Cowboy said.

'Shut up, Cowboy,' Tommy said his stature feeling faster than it had been but—

"And she likes—" He couldn't find the word. He made a circle of his fingers and punched his forefinger into it, grinning at them.

"He's gonna beat your time," someone called out to Tommy.

"You're living with a mighty bastard," Tommy told Cowboy. "You don't even know what I'm talking about."

'Girl up there,' Cowboy said pointing toward the north, out of the trees. 'She pretty.' He punched his finger into the ring of his thumb and forefinger and snorted. 'Big horse. You whore.'

Now what a minute—one of the boys said. "Are you saying you've screwed this broad, Cowboy?"

'Long time,' Cowboy said. 'Long time.'

"When you last screwed her?" Tommy said leaning in front of Cowboy and looking up into his weathered face. "This week? Last week? Last month?"

Long long time. Cowboy said wrinkling his forehead in the right kind of thinking theatrics gesturing with his cigarette.

'This year?' Tommy asked.

"Long time."

"How at least was it since you screwed her?" Tommy asked. 'Was it this summer or last? How long since you screwed her?"

'Lots lots of times," Cowboy said.

"This girl has only lived there since the winter," Tommy said.

"Looks like you and Cowboy both got great imaginations," someone said.

"Look, dammit, I'll prove it to you. She's been asking us to bring a friend. One of you bastards think you're man enough to take on a real woman, you can come along."

"Whoooo," they yelled. Tommy tried to yell them down, but he was outnumbered, and then the conversation turned as another shark snared itself on one of the rigs and Tommy went off alone, still smiling at his knowledge that there was a group there and thinking that he was going up there on Monday and a little pissed off because no one would believe him.

Mack Allen followed him into the pier house and sat beside him on a stool at the counter. Tommy had another Coke. Mack said after a long time, "You're not lying?"

"Up yours," Tommy said angrily. Mack sat silently for a long time.

"Want me to go with you?"

Tommy snorted. "I ain't begging. Me and Don can handle it."

"How about I go with you next time."

"Suit yourself," Tommy said. "I'm going Monday morning."

"Yeah. O.K.," Mack said. "I'll come on over to your house early. O.K.?"

"Suit yourself," Tommy said, wondering what Don was going to say.

For a few days the guard on the Pier House beat was alert. He walked around the outside of the building and watched the big Cat tear up the beach with remarkable efficiency. After a few days, however, it became apparent to the guard that these other guys were just like all the construction workers were like that. There was a big operation getting underway down in South America, and he wouldn't have been surprised to know that at least a couple of

the four missing guys had just decided to go south. There certainly was no threat apparent on the island. The trees looked sort of thick, but they contained nothing more than a few foxes and a coon maybe. There were no houses around, not within a half mile to the north and about the same on the south, with a nice golf course running right up to the edge of the cut on the south side. About the only danger the guard could see was the danger of being hit in the head with a stray golf ball if you went over on the south side of the cut near one of the few places where you could see through to the course. So after a while he found himself a shady spot where he could sit and watch both Cats working unless one of them went around on the other side of the dividing barrier of trees in the cut. He didn't see it happen.

One of the bulldozers was pushing felled trees into a pile. The pile was a huge one. The higher you made it the better it would burn when the burners came around, after a few days of drying out. The operator had his blade low and was digging in on the lowest part to push the pile into a more compact mass. It was an accident, a freak thing that should never have happened. In the mass of broken trees in front of the dozer there was a young pine, about five inches thick at the base. It had been pushed out easily, its tap root broken just below the ground. Its branches had been stripped by rubbing and crushing in the mass of trees. But it was very near the top now in length, its small end pointed toward the dozer. The tip had been broken too, leaving a jagged point at it two inches in thickness. The jagged end was lodged against a small oak stump and the butt end was pushed steadily against a large pine. The pressure bent it, compressed it into a bow. Just as the Cat began to bog down, unable to compress the mass further, the jagged end snapped free of the oak and the compression of the flexible young tree was released suddenly, sending it cannonlike and headon under the protective cage on the machine and to pierce the

operator just in the vee of his rib cage. No one heard his scream. The young pine went through, severing the backbone, punching a hole in the leatherette upholstery of the seatback. The big Cat spun its treads, skewed off, blade ripping free of the mass of trees. The guard saw it lumbering across the clearing toward the northern tree line, rose to see what was going on. The pine embedded in the operator's body was extending out over the hood, heavy end bouncing up and down as the Cat rocked over the rough ground. The guard gave chase, but he knew nothing about heavy equipment. The Cat hit the tree line, crashed through and over small brush, and thudded into a huge oak, where it stopped, spun tracks, and then **choked down.**

It was clearly an accident, but Flores had four straight operators tell him, hell, no, they weren't going over there. **That was a jinx job.**

Now there were too many of them. Two men on the machines, a guard, and others coming around during the day. All she could do was stand back in the woods, out of sight, and watch. Now the other was even more important. Now it was vital to her to have the visitors, for only then could she close her mind to the real one's pain. The first two were still her favorites, but she liked the others, too. And there were always new ones coming. Usually she waited for them, standing in the water, the soothing sand over her feet, the burning heat of the prints on her legs. But sometimes they'd come when she was inside, and then they would stand by the pond and whistle until she went out. Then she'd be refreshed, swollen, and at peace. Then she'd blank out the sounds of the bulldozers and the pain and afterwards she'd be rewarded with memories, with the overwhelming feeling of eternal peace and love and immortality.

Some of them wanted to swim in the pond afterward. She'd let them, telling them to be very careful. One of

of them started a water fight in the shallows and, in their enthusiasm, ripped plants from the sand. She told them not to come back.

By mid-August the Pine Tree Island cut was complete. Black smoke swelled from the burning piles. Workers carried large cans of waste oil and other inflammables to help ignite the piles of broken trees. The fires burned for days, were put out by heavy rains, regained. When it was finished, two bulldozers smoothed the ravaged area to even white sand, spotted here and there with torn, red-brown roots.

The pain was over, but it had been so vast, so extended that her nerves were raw, tingling. She moved with the memory of it, dreamed it was back. In bright white sunlight the satisfaction of the four remaining beaches hidden in the woods, covered with soft white sand and ringed by the empty sockets of trees, began to pass. She was turning something to the east, where the land was ravaged.

There were still sounds, but now it was the sounds made by the dozers and earth movers and trucks. Inside with the air conditioner running she could not hear them. One worker shouted to another to turn. Some of them were not screened. came to stand by the pond while the engines idled. Her workers got in and they went away. The noise of the dozers woke Kept her from the pond. Now it was quiet in the early morning, with the sun rising and the heat of the day still ahead, that all would be buried in sand, also on the pond. Soon now would be the worst came. She in pity, and the trees, passed back there to the room to give comfort.

"You're very sweet," she said, "but you mustn't come again."

"Why?"

"If you come again, I scream and tell my husband," she said, wanting it ended.

Well, Tommy thought, walking slowly away toward his hidden bike now he knew how. And there were still a lot of summer girls down along the strand.

15

The editor of the *Ocean City Weekly* was a fourth generation native of the area. Back in the days when land had been priced at fifty cents an acre, and large plots had often been sold for back taxes, one of his forebears had built large holdings which had remained largely intact down through the years, mainly because no one wanted to pay good money for bare sandy hills, pines, and scrubby oak. The good timber had long since been sold off. Aside from a few twisted trees unsuited for lumber, the largest stand of pine in the county would have made three good two by fours. Fast growing loblolly pine had replaced the longleaf, and about every twenty years a land war would break out, mostly for people who'd pay a few years' taxes. For decades, Ocean County was a depressed area. But there was the river, a large one in its lower stages, with enough water to take the untreated sewage of Port City absorb the mercury and other wastes of the upstream industries, and still be left over enough to be suitable for cooling large atomic reactors. The mayor had politicked openly for the power plant and not even because he owned a few hundred acres that he'd never much save industry. He had a true love for the people of the county, and was of the opinion that industry was the one hope. He worked with the newly hired economic consultant, whose salary was paid with county funds, in luring the power company officials down for oyster roasts and tours of the county.

Never had there been, in modern times, a place more

open to development. Land values were low. There was a surplus labor supply as witness the crowd at the employment house every week on unemployment check day. Of course, a large influx of people would strain the antiquated school system severely but the property taxes paid by industry would build new schools.

Just incidentally, the editor sold five hundred acres of riverside bays and sand for a price which set a new record in the county. Just incidentally, he owned a part of the most beautiful residential development land on the lower river, just outside of town. Taxes cost me his profits but by taking the long term capital gains he still was able to hold onto a respectable chunk of cash. The houses were going up three and four at a time in his housing development and doing well, selling almost as fast as they were laid out.

The prime contractor of the nuclear generating plant brought in a couple of thousand extra workers and their families and took off the slack in the local labor market. Bills were being paid for the first time by people who had, in the past, depended on fishing for their income. Merchants were building new buildings to handle the increase. When the job let off a shift at four in the afternoon, it was a thirty minute stop-and-go drive from Main Street to the edge of town. The local law enforcement agencies were worked to the breaking point, but that was a price to be paid for progress. The editor's circulation had jumped by several hundred and he knew the source of the increase. As a result, he had at least one story a week about the new plant and did his best to mention it as many times as possible, concentrating on the superintendent and power company people. Meanwhile, he was talking to the representatives of a large chemical company about an industrial site of four hundred acres adjacent to the raw cut in the land made by the power plant. The price per acre was roughly equivalent to the cost of producing Florida citrus land.

The weekly's new prosperity made it possible to hire a new reporter photographer. He came into the office

with an eight-by-ten blow-up of the dozer operator with a ten-foot length of pine sapling protruding from his belly. The editor found the picture to be interesting and well done, but a little gory for a family audience. The reporter sent the picture off to a national sensational tabloid, along with a story. The story ran in the national tabloid and, in a one paragraph squib on the inside pages, in the *Ocean City Weekly*. The freak nature of the accident appealed to the rewrite man on the City Desk at the Port City daily and it was in the morning Port City News that Dr. Irving King read about the accident. The dateline, Pine Tree Island, reminded him that he had not, as yet, satisfied his curiosity about what it was that reminded him of something regarding his recent patient, Gwen Ferrier. The account of the death triggered other long-hidden memories.

It was a slow day in the office. The doctor went to the files and started rummaging around in the years from 1935 on. Ruthie, out for coffee, surprised him and reprimanded him for messing up her files.

"If you'd do what I asked you to," he said grumpily, "I wouldn't have to mess around in your precious files."

"If you'd tell me what it is you want," she retorted, equally grumpily, "I'd get it."

"Something to do with plants," he said.

"That tells me a lot," Ruthie said. "Flowers?"

"Plants in general. Trees, grass, weeds, all of it."

"I don't recall ever having a plant as a patient," the assistant said.

"The patient was human, and, I think, female."

"You're a gold mine of information," Ruthie said. "All right, I have nothing better to do." She said it with evident suffering, the overworked female. "So I'll spend my morning looking through the files for a female patient who had a love affair with plants."

"Do that," King said, going into his office to meditate on the perversity of all women.

He had an appointment with a young man who feared that he had homosexual tendencies. They were not.

it, this being the latest in a long series going back some four months. By this time King was positive that the lad not only had tendencies, but was a flaming closet queen, and King was tempted to tell him to forget fighting it and just enjoy it. One way, he was thinking, as the young man talked endlessly about his mother's fondness for his younger sister. King covered a yawn and murmured, "Yes, go on, please."

Then he began to wonder why he did it. Why did he keep the office open? He didn't need the money, and he'd long since given up hope of getting a really interesting patient. Most of it was so damned repetitive. He would have loved to get his teeth into someone like the Boston Strangler. Now there was a psycho.

"Ruthie," he said when the potential queen had mooned out, "why don't we take down the shingle?"

"Coming to this office every day is the only thing that keeps you alive," she said brantly. "You wouldn't last a month in retirement."

"I don't know," he said. "It seems so futile sometimes."

"I'm sorry for cases of today, is that it?"

"I don't need the money," King said. "Not that I'm so damned rich; it's just that I won't live long enough to spend what I have."

"I don't share your fortunate estate," Ruthie said. "And I don't think I could walk down the street and get another job. She was holding a wad of used facial tissue in her hand.

"There's enough for both of us," King said.

"Halvers?" She smiled.

"Why not?" He was remembering her at forty, a long-legged, mature woman with a Rubens body, soft and full of delights. "Are you so old and set in your ways that you couldn't adjust to living with me?"

There was a softening in the old wrinkled face. "I've been putting up with you for forty-five years, Irving King."

"Yes."

"You're just tired. Forget your laxative?"

"Ah, the practical mind of the woman," he said, folding

his hands in front of him. "You think, to put it bluntly, that I'm just full of shit."

"That may be," she said, still smiling. He was looking at her with his face formed in a musing expression. "Let's see how you feel about it tomorrow?"

"I was just thinking," he said. "You mentioned once that you wanted to go to Greece. Did you ever make it?"

"On a two weeks' vacation?" She snorted.

"We could go," he said. "Would you like that?"

She sat on the edge of his desk and touched his shoulder. "Irving King, you're an old war horse. This office has been your life for too long. And I'm the same way. Sometimes I think how nice it would be, when the alarm goes off, to just throw it out the window and turn over and go back to sleep. But on Saturday and Sunday, when I could sleep late, I'm wide awake at seven, as usual. By Sunday evening, I'm going stir crazy. The apartment is too small. There's no smell of cigars and there's nothing to do. By Monday morning I feel as if I'm starting a new life when I get on the bus and head downtown. Now just what would we do in retirement? Play checkers?"

"Go to Greece?"

"And have to hire strong Greek boys to carry us up the steps of the Parthenon." She patted him on the shoulder. "Get to work, old man. It's all we have."

"There's a new condominium going up on the river," King said. "I've got a dollar invested in it. There's a unit on the first floor—" He cleared his throat and reached for a cigar. "I'd guarantee the smell of good Havana."

"All right," she said simply.

"Fine," he said.

"I think this is what you want," she said, standing, all business again. "A Mrs. Evelyn Rogers."

How in the hell could he have forgotten that one? He reached for the folder eagerly, not even noticing that Ruthie had smiled at him and shaken her head fondly before leaving. His mind was worse than he thought, to forget that one. His own Boston Strangler, his own Wicked Ruth Judd. Only it had never been proven.

If he ever did a book, she'd be in it. She just might be the prime attraction. He opened the folder. Courtesy, more the word. Mrs. Evelyn Rogers, The Jolly Rogers, Pine Tree Island.

She had been brought to him by her husband, a man considerably older than she, on July 10, 1937. He had caught her fornicating with a local retarded teenager. His investigation had showed only rampant nymphomania, and later, took on more interesting aspects.

As he read, his memory came back, clear, vivid. She was not a beautiful woman, but she was youthful, twenty-nine and in her prime. She talked openly about her affairs, and their variety, he remembered with a wry smile, had the effect of good pornography on his libido. Only his professional detachment had kept him from doing something foolish. Fear and a truly shocked sorrow at the waste of a life. She had children, two boys and a girl, ranging in age from ten to three years. The oldest, a girl, knew what was happening, although she was often told to play in her bedroom with the younger children and not come out on pain of severe punishment. But she was a totally sexual being, and she spoke of her activities not with shame, but with a sort of detachment, as if some other woman had been involved, not she.

"They come when they know that he is away," he read. The typescript was faded, and he had to remove his glasses and hold the page close to his face. "If I'm not outside, they whistle. Then I know and I go out."

"Why, do you suppose?" he'd asked.

"It stops the pain."

"What pain?"

His interest had been given another jolt by her answer. He'd condensed it in his notes, and it had been transcribed from his rapid scrawl by the efficient Miss Ruth Hensley. It had to do, he had gathered, although she was not perfectly clear, with a logging operation. The timber on Pine Tree Point, in 1937, was not virgin, but it was old stands, untouched for a hundred years. She had talked about the constant round of saws and axes, the rumblings of the

logging trucks, and the vulgar talk of the loggers. And she'd talked about the trees, how they hurt when the ax bit in, and how it made her want to scream.

It had not all come out in one session. It had been scattered through weeks of treatment, but then it had begun to make a picture and now, as he read, it began to take shape.

She had asked her husband, begged her husband to cease the timbering. But 1937 was a hard year, and, apparently, Paul Rogers desperately needed money. She mentioned the cost of the large house. She said once that Paul was worried about money, something about his northern investments going bad.

"Tell him, Dr. King. Tell him it's his fault. Tell him I only do it because it hurts. Tell him I'll stop if he'll stop the pain."

The file was relatively thin. The series of treatments had been terminated abruptly. It was closed out by a newspaper story about the tragic death of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Rogers in a flash fire at their luxurious home on Pine Tree Island. All the bodies except Evelyn's had been discovered in their beds, or what was left of the bodies and the beds. Human bodies are devilishly difficult to burn, and there was enough left for identification purposes. Rogers's remains were discovered in the area of the master bedroom. The three children had died in their own beds. Evelyn Rogers, horribly burned, did manage to get out of the house. She was found several hundred yards from the house, with her body half submerged in the waters of a small, natural pond. Her clothing had been burned off. Sheer speculation by the newspaper writer had her running from the house in flames. The fire had spread to the underbrush around the house. Perhaps, it was speculated, she ran ahead of the flames, seeking relief for her terrible pain in the water.

Hard Finish. But then, a young psychiatrist had seen more than was stated in the newspaper article. In fact, King, knowing the degree of disturbance in his patient, had called the Ocean County Coroner. There were notes re-

garding the content of his conversation with the political hack who held the office, along with marginal notations of his dissatisfaction with the information received. No, the coroner had not performed autopsy on the remains, there were not enough remains to work with. No, the coroner was not a medical doctor. No, there were no facilities in Ocean County to make the kind of detailed analysis which Dr. King requested. Waste of time, anyhow. It was evident what had happened.

End of case.

Except for three more clippings, also dated in 1937, late in the year. A decomposing corpse had been discovered by loggers working on Pine Tree Island. The remains were identified as being those of one J. Edgar Smith, Negro, a former employee of the sawmill operator doing the logging. A protracted search of the area turned up three other bodies, also black, also former employees of the sawmill operator. In the South, in 1937, if a Negro had been turned in as missing by his relatives to the local law enforcement officers, the officers would have laughed. Everyone knew the shiftlessness of Negroes. Three dead Negroes, more or less, even four, made only inside pages of the newspapers.

Yes, King thought, putting the file back in its folder, he'd had his course, and he'd blown it. There was, of course, no direct evidence, but Evelyn Rogers had been one disturbed young man. A woman, young, strong, healthy, who stared at a pair of trees as they were cut was not exactly normal. His notes indicated a huge reservoir of latent hostility toward her husband, whom she blamed for the logging. Most mass murderers had some sexual problem, and Evelyn Rogers had hers. It was entirely within the realm of possibility that the deaths of the Rogers twins had not been accidental. Paul Rogers knew of his wife's infidelity. In his one talk with Rogers, King had seen a man embittered, a man full of anger. He'd talked freely with great emphasis on the fact that his wife's lover was a retarded boy, big for his size but with the mentality of a six-year-old. And there was the matter of the dead loggers

Four strong Negro men. But give a woman the proper weapon and she can be deadly, even against strong men.

Too bad. If she had lived, he would have offered his services. He'd have worked for nothing, just to have the chance to pry into such a mind.

But that was in the past and now his curiosity was satisfied. To himself, for the first time, he admitted that he had neither the time nor the energy to write his book, that it would never be written. Evelyn Rogers, interesting as she was, would die, once again, when he died. His will provided that his files be destroyed.

Too bad. If he had known all, if he'd had a chance to talk with the woman, he might have been able to—to what? Satisfy his craving for sensation? Please his ego with an article about an interesting aberration? Help? Save lives?

Perhaps it was time to quit. Wasn't his attitude toward the potential homosexual a clear sign that he was no longer interested in the welfare of his patients? Once he could have become totally involved in the case, worried about it and thought of ways to help. When the patient no longer seemed important, then it was time to take down his shingle.

He chewed on the cigar, which had long since gone out. No use lighting it. Nature herself would solve the problem soon enough. Meanwhile, as Ruth had said, what else was there? Greece? He'd have to carry an extra steamer trunk just to contain enough medication to last the both of them. One reason why he'd never married was a recognized desire to retain all his freedoms, and now he was tied to his medicine cabinet even more securely than he would have been tied to a family. He could have married Ruthie, at thirty, was a real woman. That he'd not had the time. Had prized his freedom.

He tossed the closed file folder onto the front of his desk. That was a part of his past and, nevertheless, it was something. At least before Ruth dug it out, there was a little hint of curiosity, something to occupy his mind now and then when he thought about it. Having read it, he now

no real connection with anything. True, both Evelyn Rogers and Gwen Ferrier had sexual problems, but they seemed to be diametrically opposed. From what he'd gathered, Mrs. Ferrier's problem was sexual repression, not an overly free expression of sexual desire. What was it that had led his subconscious mind to make a connection between the two cases? Probably just the coincidence of residence. Pine Tree Island was a remote, thinly populated area. It was remarkable enough that he'd have two patients, even years apart, from the Island. That was probably it. Perhaps a bit of the plant business, too. For he'd gathered from the Ferriers that they had some interest in plants. George had remarked on the health of the fly-traps transplanted inside by his wife, and he had lavishingly said that they were happy because his wife talked to them and pampered them with bread. But Gwen Ferrier wasn't identifying with plants as had Evelyn Rogers, and Gwen Ferrier had not done in a family and possibly four plant killers.

"The diner has fried eggplant on the menu," Ruth said, poking her head in the door.

"Fine," he said. He took her arm. "Shall we lunch in elegance and grace at the famous greasy spoon of Port City?"

"Don't forget your antacid tablets," Ruth said.

16

Work on the cross-marsh canal began in mid-August. On low tide, vehicles with huge, wide rubber tires marked the late summer greenness, pushing swatches of marsh grass down into the underlying black mud. Lumbering, tall, awkward-looking dragglines mounted on barges began to dig. The line of the canal avoided the open water, since the engineers preferred to anchor the canal to the most solid of the marsh areas. Thus the forward progress of the diggers and the big-wheeled vehicles took a three-hundred-yard bite out of the heaviest of the tall, swaying grass.

Once George had jokingly remarked that assuming that plants felt pain, what mass agony would ensue when a reaper crossed a wheat field. Actually, she knew, he was not altogether wrong. When ripe wheat is harvested, the old, brown stalk are almost wasted. The life force has been concentrated in the seeds. Thus the mutilation of the stalks is almost painless and the wheat seeds are tough and hardly feel the operation. Of course there is some pain, for some seeds are crushed. But the real tragedy of a wheat field comes when the seeds, the harvested wheat, are utilized.

She understood all of it now. Since the clearing operation had been completed, bringing a temporary halt in the mass pain, she'd had time to stand in the edge of the shallow water and communicate. She was more and more a part of it. She was able to submerge herself in it and know the true peace. But when the canal digging began

she screamed aloud the sound piercing the unpeopled woodlands and startling birds and a curious squirrel.

She watched them from the island. They were far across the marsh. There was no way to reach them and inflict pain in return. There was only suffering. And suffering could be momentarily eased in only one way. She drove down the island to the pier, saw some of her former friends, and issued invitations. It began again and her soul hungering for the release, bloomed quickly into what ordinary people would have considered a bad market in promiscuity. However, she was no ordinary person. To her had been revealed a Utopia, a heaven of coexistence. That communication was mostly one-way was a problem. She could not explain. And, unable to explain, she soon lost the conviction of her own knowledge and shared the incomprehension. It was incredible that such pain could be suffered by men in such mass quantities. Yet it continued. In the heavy marsh where the black mud was covered at high tide and kept eternally wet, the grass grew to a thickness of about ten individuals per square inch. One hole of a drainage line lived a square yard or more. And with the grass numbering quickly into the millions, went thousands of snails and periwinkles. Gleaming white wings were ripped from the deep mud, along with razor clams, quahogs, mussels near the edges of the small, watery ruts, other varieties.

It was the Planet of Death.

In many ways it was worse than the clearing of the trees, for there death had been an incisive blade or a massive rending. Here it often was a slow, lingering death smothered, crushed under tons of mud, jostling along in the currents to the spoil area, interment under acres following into an absence of sun and air. Death did not cease in hurt stillness, but ached like a sore tooth, and the cries, colors of death were enough to disturb the very air itself, make it heavy with sorrow, ruined with dying vegetation and with soundless screams. And she felt it all and tried, encouraging the ripe, swollen feeling, to drown it permanently in flesh. But eager as they were,

those young boys and young men who came often to the point, numerous as they were, it was impossible to fill twenty-four hours with the anesthesia of carnality. And as the digging approached the island, the screams grew louder.

George was concerned. He couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something wrong. She was dreaming again, not sleeping well. Many times he'd awake, missing the soft heat of her in his bed, and find her walking the room, or staring out the window, or merely sitting wide awake in a bedroom chair, her cigarette glowing in the dark. It was not the same old problem, he knew that. Never again would he be concerned with his wife's lack of sensuality. In fact the change in that respect was gratifyingly spectacular. He teased her about having to call in outside help, but he bore up manfully under her demands and, in fact, loved it.

But there were dark shadows under her eyes. She was not eating properly. She was losing weight. Her waist was flat and thin and her breasts were smaller but tighter. She was, he told her often, one sexy-looking broad. But why didn't she go to a doctor or something and find out why she wasn't sleeping? He bought non-prescription sleep aids and forced them on her. Then he called Doc Brawn and got, without an office call, a mild sleeping pill which worked equally as ineffectively as the non-prescription drugs.

His life, on the whole, was a dreamy, pleasant one. Semi-retired, working only because he enjoyed it, owning his own large acres, a nice house and a private swimming pond which he used often, a beautiful sexy wife who was his friend as well as his lover, he had no complaints, save for his worry about her health. However she continued to paint a bit, kept the house clean and orderly, and cooked great meals with an emphasis on the things George liked: meats and seafoods. If he noticed the lack of fresh vegetables on the table he pretended not to because he wasn't fond of fresh vegetables anyhow. There were always enough canned foods in the house to provide a

balance, and he took his morning vitamin pill without fail.

They managed to extract only one life in return. It was a happy accident, at that. Jack Flores, pleased with the progress of the canal-marsh crossing, was looking over the site. He borrowed a marsh buggy, a vehicle without a top which almost floated on high, wide rubber wheels, and drove the length of the surveyed route. The dredges had moved in behind him, following in the wake of the drag lines which were stripping the vegetation and top mud away, getting down to pulpy stuff which could be sucked up and pumped away through the long discharge pipes extending across the waterway to the "wasteland" spoil basin. He had crossed the waterway in a small plastic boat and had noted that the operation was muddying the waters, but a vast amount of tidal flow swept down the waterway and would, according to his calculations, carry the silt away without silting up the waterway itself to a great degree. If it did, well, he had the dredges to dig it out again. He watched the operation for a while and chuckled as a group of small boys in boats waved and played as they too watched man alter nature. Then he got into the marsh buggy and drove out toward the island into marsh which hadn't yet been spoiled by the dredging. There were tricks to it now. It was tricky driving a marsh buggy because the marsh was cut by numerous gutsand near the guts the mud was bottomless. It wouldn't look good for the boss to get a buggy stuck and have to call for help, so he was careful to stay on solid ground.

The little vehicle churned along at a smooth pace and flushed out what the locals called marsh hens, long-legged black birds of the rail family which flew awkwardly. When a marsh hen came up, its stubby wings beat against the tips of the grass for long moments before it freed itself to struggle a few yards downwind. Flores had hunted the erratic, wild Mexican quail of the Southwest, and he disdained the slow, awkward flight of the hens, wondering how anyone could find sport in shooting anything so easy

to hit. But it was sort of funny the way they squawked as they were flushed out, wings fighting the air, long necks outthrust.

He was nearing the sandy cut on the island, with only a few yards of marsh between him and solid ground. He was feeling good. The job was on schedule, all the problems had not been solved, but were at least under control. He could almost see in his mind the print in his contract which guaranteed him one hell of a bonus when he brought the canal in on time. Then a big marsh hen came up right under his wheels and for a moment, Flores was a kid. He jerked the wheel of the buggy and followed the bird, the hood of the vehicle almost touching its long legs. He held no malice toward the terrified bird. It was only a game. He was just horsing around. There was good solid marsh under the wheels, and he jerked the vehicle as the bird started to draw away, steering to stay with it. "Fly, you mother," he yelled gleefully, pleased with the bird, which was staying in the air much longer than they usually did. He was so intent on staying with the bird that he didn't notice the change in color to a deeper green, which indicated that there was a small gut ahead in the grass. The vehicle's front wheels hit, sank, stopped the forward motion. The gut was a tiny one, so narrow that the grass almost closed over the top of it. Flores flew through the air. He hadn't bothered to strap himself in. The gut was a curving, snaky one and he flew over a bend and landed in a foot of water on living oysters. The shells dug in, cut, ripped. He landed with one arm under him, and he heard it snap. He lay there, dazed, the pain held back by the initial shock. He was just a few yards from the solid earth of the island. He looked down and saw that he was cut. He couldn't tell how badly, but his blood was staining the water which lay, black and muddy, in the bottom of the gut.

He tried to move and his arm hurt. He felt weak. He had cut his head, too, and the blood was flowing down into his eyes. He tried to wipe it away, but his hands were muddy. He went dizzy and lay still. When he could see

again, he washed his hands in the muddy water and then tried to clear his eyes. He wondered if his accident had been observed but he doubted it. The work force was all the way over on the other side of the marsh.

He crawled a few feet, finding it easy to make his way through the mud and water as long as he lay flat. He was so weak he began to worry a little. He figured he might have a slight concussion. Then he heard someone coming through the marsh, feet sucking and slapping the wet mud. "Hey," he called.

He looked up through mud and blood and saw a woman. She was standing on the more solid mud looking down on him as he lay in the bottom of the small gut. "Hey, get a couple of the men," he said, surprised to hear himself sounding as if he were half dead, his voice weak and puny. "I think I've got a broken arm."

"Are you with them?" she asked, not moving her head, staring at him.

"Huh?"

"Are you with the people who are killing the marsh?"

"Oh, yeah. Listen, honey." He tried to sit up and couldn't make it. "Listen, I'm hurting. Will you get someone?"

"I'll help," she said, stepping down into the gut where she sank to her knees in soft, black mud. The water was only inches deep.

"Who are you?" she asked, looking at him closely and noting the cuts, the blood, the trailing, twisted arm, and his weakness.

"Does that matter?"

"Yes," she said.

"I'm Flores, site supervisor."

"That's wonderful," she said. "In a way, then, you're responsible. You directed a lot of it and told them what to kill."

He looked at her, beginning to hurt back hard. The salt water was getting to his cuts. The original shock was wearing off and his body was raising hell. "Kill?" He tried to move, and gasped in pain. "What are you talking about?"

"You're the boss?"

"Yeah, listen, I'm beginning to hurt. Will you please go get some of my men?"

"No," she said. "I'm going to watch you die."

He felt cold. There was something about her which scared the hell out of him. He, Jack Flores, was scared of a woman. When he moved, the pain hit him and he went black. When he opened his eyes she was squatting beside him. He figured her as a real nut. She looked it. Her eyes weren't even blinking. They just stared at him. "All right," he said, "tell me what it's all about, huh?"

"I want you to know why you're dying," she said. "I want you to listen, to try to feel. Can you feel it?"

"Huh?" He was listening, all right, and what he heard was good news. He heard a marsh buggy's engine and it was coming closer.

"You should hear it," she said. "The screams. They're dying. Can't you hear it?"

"Yeah, sure," he said, humoring her, waiting as the marsh buggy's engine got louder and finally coming closer. But she heard it, too. She stood and looked out over the tall grass. Then she straddled him and pushed his face down into the water. He tried to yell. His face was pushed into the soft mud and he could feel her knees on his back. With her hands she was pushing his face down. He fought but he was weak. His body bucked and she rode it, hearing the motor coming closer and feeling his muscles spasm. His good arm came up and tried to grasp her legs, but it slid off the muddy fabric of her slacks. She pushed, teeth together, eyes wide, up pulled back, arms straining. He held his breath, not believing it. He went limp, thinking she'd let him go. His face was pushed into the mud. Water covered his ears. She didn't release him. She pushed harder and he felt the cold black mud all around his face. He gathered all his strength and bucked and fought, trying to dislodge her. His lungs spasmed. Mud clogged the passages of his nose and filled his mouth and throat. He gagged and then felt the blackness coming on.

She stood up, waving. The marsh buggy came and

stopped. Two men jumped out. 'I was standing on the hill,' she said, 'and I saw him drive into the gut. He was thrown clear. I tried to do something, but he stayed in the mud. When I got here he was—' She sobbed.

Jack Flores was in a sitting position. His face was covered with streaks of mud. She had tried to scrape it away, leaving white areas showing through. She had cleared the mud from his mouth. 'I tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation,' she said. They could see the mud on her face; they admired her for trying.

The two men called Flores and the marsh buggy. They didn't even notice when she left to go back to her car. The local weekly quoted the two men as saying that an unidentified woman had tried to save the life of the site supervisor. The coroner's verdict was death by suffocation. The mud clogging Jack Flores's nose and throat was too thick to allow water to enter his lungs and drown him.

She washed the black mud away in the clear waters of the pond. It dissolved and settled to the bottom to settle lightly on the thick, pale pads. She removed her clothes, washed them in the water, and took them back. She washed them again in the mud once, dried them, put them back on. She looked fresh. By a circuitous route, then, turning she headed a white Datsun by the pond. She smiled, walked out onto the bridge over the pond. 'Oi, here,' she called.

17

What do you do when you think your wife is beginning to crack up? Well, you laugh at yourself and say you're imagining things.

Of course it was not like Gwen. "I'm glad," she said.

They were discussing the death of Jack Flores. At least George was discussing it. "Boy, what a way to go," he said. "The paper says he must have been alive when he was thrown from the marsh buggy into the mud."

"I'm glad he's dead," Gwen said flatly. It was so unlike her that he could not, at first, credit his ears. "I wish they'd kill all of them," she added with a little smile.

"Honey," he said, "the noise is bad, but that bad?" There was heavy equipment working around the clock. The dredges were a constant, if distant, roar. There were occasional hoots of air horns as the dredgemen signaled. On the island, draglines were working. They rerouted their land via a sandy detour. The road next to the beach had been dug away and a small bridge was under construction. It was never quiet. "In another few months we'll have it all to ourselves again. In fact, it'll be more private than ever. There'll only be one way to get here, over the bridge. There'll be a high wire fence around the marsh, so no one will be able just to wander over on our side."

"Yes," she said. It was the only hope she had. She was helpless against the workers in the marsh. "But wouldn't it be divine justice if we could kill all of them."

"Jesus, you're bloody-minded this morning," he said, kissing her and hurrying off to shave and prepare for work.

He thought about it as he shaved. By itself it could be idle conversation, even if it was desperately out of character for a girl as gentle as Gwen. The pup came in and chewed on his foot, and George jiggled it playfully. When he finished, Gwen was sitting in the big room, hands on the arms of the chair, eyes unblinking, straight ahead. He was shocked, for she was directly in the light of the glass doors and the morning sun and her face looked strained, washed out.

"Do you feel all right?" he asked.

He had to repeat the question. "Oh, sure," she said.

Little things. Her appearance. She was still losing weight. The space between her thighs was back. Her face looked thin. The un-Gwen-like talk about leaving. And the house was becoming a botanical garden. Every available inch of sunny window space was occupied by pots containing the flytraps. The demand for insects was so great that George had given up. She fed the flytraps raw hamburger, rationing them to one bit per week. She never seemed to tire of feeding them, dropping the hamburger bits into the small black triggered hairs and watching the traps close. Little things. Her pleasing but rather puzzling reversal in her attitudes toward sex. From a woman who wanted to hide the shameful act under the covers she'd developed into a wild and wanton sexpot. She liked new things. On Sunday she'd suggested they do it on the lounge on the breezeway, in the open air, in broad daylight. Went absolutely wild. And then, not once but three or four times, he had come home to find her standing ankle deep in the waters of the boat pond, her head tilted back and her arms hanging limply at her sides. Once he'd seen her swaying in the breeze like a tall sunflower. It was, when you put all the other things together, it was sort of frightening. And that last thing, that was the last straw. The cleared areas were overgrown. He'd gotten out the mower. She hearing it start, had run out, teased him off it and taken him inside to distract him. And they'd stayed in bed late that very morning. It was as if she didn't want him to mow the new growth. He was bedamned if

he was going to let the damned jungle move back in and take over all of it after all his hard work clearing it.

Little things. Her moodiness. Sometimes he had to speak to her two or three times before she heard. Sometimes she looked at him without recognition in her eyes. And if he didn't know better, he'd have been a suspicious husband because of the innovations she'd introduced into their lovemaking. Once, when she suggested a particularly weird position, he said, "What the hell? Are you experimenting with a kooky lover or something?"

"Reading books, darling," she cooed, urging him into the position, which, he found, was interesting, if rather athletic.

"Gwen, you don't look so good," he said one day. "Why not have Doc Braws check you over?"

"I'm fine," she said.

Then there was the flytrap-gathering expedition. "Honey," he said, when she went off toward the bog with a small trowel and a basket, "those damn things are eating us out of house and home now."

"It'll be cold soon," she said.

"Hell, they're used to the cold. They're tough little beggars. They even live through ground fires."

He followed her, nevertheless. She scooped up only weak-looking specimens. He tired of it and walked back to the clear pond. He was thinking it might be nice to find some tadpoles somewhere and put them into the pond. The croaking of frogs would, at least, offer a bit of counterpoint to the incessant roar of the heavy equipment. Funny that there weren't frogs there, anyhow. In all his swimming he'd never even seen a minnow. The only life he saw in the pond was the plants and the mosquito larva. He'd been meaning to talk with the game warden and find out about getting some fingerling bass to stock the pond. Be nice to stand on the balcony and cast for a couple of largemouths.

He walked around the pond idly and saw tracks on the far side. Kids were always coming onto the property. He didn't really mind, but he didn't want to think of the little

bastards hiding there on the far side of the pond watching them on the balcony. Wow. Here he was the one getting touchy about sex, thinking that they'd better not do it outdoors in the daytime again. Well, what the hell. If she wanted to. Give the little bastards a thrill if they stuck up and saw them. When he was a kid there was this couple in the neighborhood. They got drunk on Saturday afternoons and forget to close the bedroom shades. A boy could stand in the alley, hidden behind a row of tall okra in the garden, and get an eyeful. He chuckled and turned to see what Gwen was doing. She was on her knees, staring and motionless. She apparently didn't feel his eyes on her. She was about twenty-five yards away. She was close enough for him to see clearly, when she cupped her hand in the black acid earth, lifted it, looked at it, then licked it, and then took a bite of the dirt. She just licked her hand, opened her mouth, and took a bite. Just like that.

He didn't mention it to her. When she came up to the house with several new flytraps to be potted in their acid soil, he noticed a smudge on her chin. After that he started watching her more closely. He felt like a spy. He felt disloyal. He wanted to talk it out with her, to say, "Honey, why the hell did you eat dirt?"

Instead, feeling guilty and a bit scared, but not too upset because she was attracted to Gwen and he knew her and she was probably just going through a stage of nervousness brought on by the overwork in the heavy competition she'd joined in on Dr. Irving King, he next time he had to go to Port City to the chromosomes supper house. He let it all hang out, as the expression goes. He talked about her former sexual hangups and the great change, the attachment to the flytraps, her loss of weight, the circles under her eyes, her nervousness, and her uncharacteristic remarks about wishing all the construction workers dead.

King seemed to be more interested after that. And when George got around to the dirt eating, he was positively avid for more information, asking questions and waving his cigar, animated. One question was a gasser.

"Do you have any reason to suspect that your wife could be, ah, indulging in marital infidelity?" the doctor asked.

George felt anger at first, and then he considered it. "No, none at all. She definitely would not do that."

George talked about the constant noise. King wanted details of the construction project. He got them. He leaned back, puffed on his dead cigar, and then chewed it thoughtfully. "Mr. Ferrier, I think it advisable that you bring your wife in to see me."

"I don't think she'll come," George said. "I've been trying to get her to go in to see our family doctor. She finds a million excuses not to go."

"I see," King said. "You once invited me to visit you."

"Sure," George said.

"I think I will drop in the first of next week."

"Let me know and I'll make it a point to be home," George said.

"I think not," King said. "I'll arrange it to arrive late in the afternoon. Then I can have a chat with Mrs. Ferrier before you come home from work."

"Well," George said, "if that's the way you want it."

When a man is eighty-two, he feels the days growing shorter. The first of the week can mean Monday, Tuesday, or even, in extreme procrastination, Wednesday. But Irving King's curiosity was aroused once more, and when you're eighty-two, if you put things off until Wednesday, Wednesday might never come. He drove to Pine Tree Island on Monday afternoon, arriving at the Ferrier house just after three o'clock. He found it to be a charming place, if a little weedy out front. He walked up the steps to the front deck and looked for a doorbell. There was none. He knocked. Waited. When no one came, he went down the steps carefully and walked around the house. He stood for a long time, with his heart acting up to the point of making him uneasy.

It was not the voyeur in him which caused his agitation. He was too old even for that. It was sheer intellectual excitement, the feeling of finding something. At eighty-two he was being given a second chance, and the coincidence

of it was so striking that he had a very good feeling about it all. It was as if some kind god looked down and said, "Irving King, you blew it once. Now here's your second chance."

He could, of course, be aware of the erotic aspect. She was obviously enjoying it. And there was a certain element of perversion, since she and the teen-age boy atop whom she was performing had an audience, another teen-ager who watched as he slowly dressed.

Apparently he had arrived just in time for the last scene of the last act. He could hear her breathing, even from the distance, and then she fell atop the boy and lay still for a moment. The boy, apparently, was ready to go. He pushed her off. She rolled onto the grass and lay there with her eyes closed as the boy quickly pulled on his jeans and shirt. Then she was alone, the two boys having peered into the thick growth on the far side of the pond. King continued to watch. She rose and walked slowly to the edge of the water, paused, and then plunged in to bathe the sweat and fluids of excess from her body. He watched. She stood dripping, with her back toward him, her feet planted in shallow water.

"Ya," he said, as she began a slow, steady swaying motion, her arms stretched out her sides, her face turned heavenwards.

He walked toward her, making no special effort to be quiet. However, she did not hear him. He stood behind her, only a few feet away. He cleared his throat. She continued to sway slowly.

"Gwen," he said softly. "Gwen."

She turned slowly, without surprise. Her eyes looked into his unblinkingly. "I didn't mean to spy, Gwen," he said.

"You saw then?"

"Yes."

She walked past him and stooped gracefully to pick up her clothes. Her speed in getting ready was still astonishing. She slipped into her coloring unhurriedly. "Let's sit on the balcony. You must be tired after your drive."

"A bit," he said, trying to match her coolness. He followed her and sat in a comfortable deck chair. She curled her feet under her on the lounge.

"Would you like to talk about it?" he asked, after a long silence.

"Please don't tell George," she said simply. She was not begging, she was merely making a request.

"Perhaps you will have to tell him. Someday."

"Yes. Someday." She lit a cigarette and blew smoke moodily. "I can't expect you to understand."

"Perhaps I do. A little." He had an eerie feeling of having talked with her, about the same things, before. He drew on that feeling. "It eases the pain."

Her expression told him he'd hit the mark. However, she regained control quickly. "How did you know? You can't feel the pain. We're female. Only we feel it."

Elation mixed with his genuine concern for her. He was the most fortunate of all psychiatrists, to have found two almost identical cases of such great interest. First Evelyn Rogers, in 1937, thinking she could feel the pain of a tree being felled, and then, in his last years, Gwen Ferrier with an identical fantasy.

"But that was why you were—ah, entertaining those lads, wasn't it? So that you could forget the pain, at least for a few moments?"

She nodded.

"Is the pain so terrible?"

She shuddered. "We are so helpless. We can't run. We can only wait, knowing that the pain is coming, that death moves toward us. We anticipate the rending, the tearing, the crushing. We do feel, you know. We have nerves, feelings, emotions. If you could only know."

"I cannot, of course, actually know without feeling, can I? Human speech isn't the definitive form of communication, is it? I mean, it's so imprecise. Yet, I can understand that you are genuinely frightened. I find your—ah, communications with the vegetable kingdom to be fascinating, Gwen. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

She shrugged.

"Do all plants have awareness?"

"Yes."

"Some more than others?"

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity. Interest. Concern for you."

"Bullshit." Her unladylike response exploded from her lips. "You don't care. You can't feel."

He glanced at his watch, estimating the time remaining before George arrived. She had to be opened up, but carefully. "But I can understand, at least somewhat. I can believe you." He waited and when she didn't speak he said, "It must be quite terrible to be the only one to feel the pain."

"There are others," she said.

"But not alive." He was taking a shot in the dark.

This gave her pause. She stubbed out her cigarette before looking up, unblinkingly, into his eyes. "Not alive in the sense you understand it."

"Isn't there just one form of life?"

"You see," she said, "You can't possibly understand."

"You say there are others, living in some fashion. I recall another young woman, much like you. She is most certainly dead, by our human standards. She first killed her family."

"She did only what she was forced to do." Gwen said. "She cannot be condemned for doing what she had to do."

It was King's turn to be startled. How much did she know about Evelyn Rogers? How could she know? "You excuse her actions?" he asked, trying to gain time for thought.

"I praise her actions," Gwen said. "She exchanged pain for pain. It was an unequal exchange, true, but she gave terminal pain to six of them."

King felt his ancient heart begin to accelerate. He needed a pill, but he dared not break the mood. "There were only four," he said. "Four lovers. Then her family."

"Six," Gwen said softly. "Two were never found."

"The children," King said. "Did she have to murder her children?" He was stunned, at a loss for words. He had merely assumed that Evelyn Rogers had killed the four loggers. Now this lovely young woman was confirming it, out of a self-confident store of knowledge which caused confusion in his mind, and, moreover, was adding to the grisly score.

"That was sad," Gwen said. "She weeps for them. But she couldn't leave them behind."

"Are they, ah, wherever she is?"

"No." No explanation.

"May I ask," King said, gathering his thoughts, "how you know about her?"

"Evelyn?" The name had not, as yet, been mentioned. "I know."

"You've heard tales?"

"I've heard *the* story," Gwen said, smiling.

"Yes," King said. "She was my patient." That was not what he had wanted to say. He had wanted to ask how Gwen had heard the story.

"Yes," Gwen said. "I know. And I am not your patient, Dr. King."

"Should you be?" he asked, his voice soft and kind.

"For my sake or yours?" She lit another cigarette without haste. "For your sake I stopped seeing you."

"For my sake?"

"We were afraid you'd make the connection."

"But you came to me of your own accord," he said. "Before I knew Evelyn."

The sun was low. George would be home soon. King had a desperate desire to know, to explore, to probe into her mind. "You can't talk with George about it, for obvious reasons. Wouldn't you like to talk with someone? Would it help if you talked with me?"

She considered. "No," she said. "It would be useless."

"Not to me," he said. "With Evelyn I came close to something, Gwen, something I couldn't understand. We doctors think we know the extent of the human mind. We

pride ourselves on being able to take long, extended voyages inside a fellow human's head, but, frankly, we've never gone past the membrane of the brain, except with artificial surgical tools. I'm an old man. I failed to discover whatever it was that made Evelyn Rogers different. I failed to save her." He paused. "I am not necessarily implying that you are in need of salvation, you understand, although some of your actions have certain aspects of self-destruction. Let's just say that I'm burning candles. For example, I saw you standing in the shallow water. You swayed in the wind. Were you, for that period of time, a plant?" He knew he was being too direct, but time was short.

"No, of course not."

"What then?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Would you please allow me to try to understand?" He noted her negative reaction and resettled to be patient. "You don't have a choice. You know. I saw you at dinner with those two young boys."

She was serene. "That was necessary."

"Would George agree that it was necessary?"

"Yes," she said. "I was afraid it would come to that." She had, in fact, been hoping desperately that he would not push it that far. She sighed. "At night. We'd talk. You will stay for dinner." It was not a question.

"If you like," King said.

"Depending on which sources you read," Green said, "the Germans killed three to seven million Jews during World War II. I have, if you can bring there, been able to see it all and more importantly, to bring alive to feel real. Multiply hopeless death, terror, agony by seven million."

"I will admit openly that I can't imagine it," King said. "The mind is peculiar that way. We just cannot accept mass death. The death of one man, Stalin observed, is more moving than the extermination of millions."

"But if you could feel a million deaths."

"Can you?"

"We share all," she said.

"We?"

"Yes, we. We plants. All of us."

"All trees? All weeds?" He removed a cigar from his pocket and began to unwrap it. He chewed the end of it thoughtfully. When she remained silent he asked, "Why are you the only one to communicate with them?"

"I told you there have been others."

"Evelyn? Who else?"

"A girl. She's here, too."

"Where?"

"There," Gwen said, looking toward the center of the clear, green waters of the pond. "She drowned there."

"And she's there now?"

"Yes, with Evelyn. With them."

"As I remember it, now that you've mentioned it, she drowned with her boyfriend. Is he there?"

"We are female," she said.

"Males can't feel or communicate?"

"We are female."

"All plants?" King asked.

"No, of course not. Us."

"I see," he said, not seeing at all. "When you say, we are female, you are talking about some special sort of plant. You are not referring to you, Evelyn, and the other girl, or to plants in general, only something special."

She rose. "Will you walk with me?"

He followed her into the boggy area at the lower end of the pond. As they crossed toward high ground she said, "Don't step on them. Watch out for them." He saw the flytraps. They were almost hidden under taller weeds and grasses. He stepped carefully.

"Are the flytraps the special ones?" he asked.

She smiled. "That's almost funny." She led the way to the high ground on the far side of the pond. There mushrooms grew. She squatted, bent, and picked them.

"Mushrooms don't feel, then," King said, pleased to catch her in an inconsistency.

"Fungi are poor, dumb things, not truly alive."

"I see. But back to the flytraps."

"Yes. There is a certain ironic humor in what they are called." She was selecting more mushrooms. "You can't them Venus-flytraps, as if they were not of this earth."

'They're not?'

'It was a miracle that they survived," she said. She had picked a half-dozen mushrooms. Her hands full, she passed the mushrooms on to King. He held them gingerly. They were clammy and slick in his hand. "The crash burned everything, everything except for a few small portions which were thrown clear."

'Ah,' King said. "I think I have it. There was a crash. A spaceship? And the flytraps, an alien species, survived."

"Yes."

"Then they're the special ones. When you refer to us or we, you're talking about you and the flytraps." Actually, it made a special sort of sense. Discarded myths often hold quite credible fantasies.

"They're only plants," she said.

"Then I'm relieved to hear," King admitted. He accepted another handful of mushrooms. "I take it we're calling 'lose'?"

"Yes."

'I usually get them from a can."

'They're quite safe." She smiled at him. "Believe me, I know."

"Yes. I suppose you would know." He followed her back across the bog, stepping gingerly. 'May I ask what are the special ones?"

"I'm going to ask you to use your imagination again," she said. "Imagine a world where fear is unknown."

"And, again, you're asking for something very difficult, especially for a man of eighty who has seen death in"

"I'm talking about man's ability for everything that"

'But isn't that impossible?' Dirt bag ashes sat in the fishes on your world?"

"On our world, the thing we need is here." She stooped and lifted a handful of dirt.

"Are they special plants on that world?"

'In a way. Oh, they can move. They are intelligent

They are, in fact, far ahead of us. They came here in a great ship, across vast distances. They carried their own earth with them. They returned to it for rest and sustenance, remembering all the while the beauty of the home world, longing to return, but curious about the universe. Think of the shock to them to discover death. In their world there was only life. No living thing ate any other living thing. It was the earth which provided, earth, the eternal earth which fed and sustained and kept. And, in return, they nourished the earth with their bodies."

"Ah," King said. "Without dying?"

"Think of a wheat field. You may believe that a wheat field dies on maturity. It does not. The life force is stored in the seeds. On the home world it is much the same. There were new beginnings for the body, but the life force was a constant. Life, itself, went on, learning, loving beauty, and living in eternal peace. Then they came here."

"To crash and die," King said. They were at the steps to the balcony. He panted slightly as he climbed.

"Their bodies died," she explained. "And most of their specimens. Only one of the plants aboard survived and adapted. At home, the plants did not have to eat insects." She led the way into the kitchen, took the mushrooms from his hands, and put them into the sink for washing. He sat down at the dining table as she began to prepare the meal. "The life force managed to transfer. At first, it lived in sort of a limbo, rootless. Then water collected in the crater caused by the crash. Native waterplants took root. One was adaptable. It was a poor substitute for what we had known, but it provided a body, a stationary body, a prison. There was no escape. It was so lonely, and there was death all around. There was woodfire and animals nibbling leaves. Our plants are not as highly developed as theirs, but they still are living beings and can feel pain and know death. Death was a new and terrible experience. We—they concentrated together in the crater. The flytraps, lower on the life scale and more adaptable, spread over a small area, the area they now inhabit. It was good to have the flytraps. They represented something

known in a strange and terrible world. Through the fly-traps they can leave the pond, widen their horizon, experience something other than sameness. But they don't like it out here. Mostly they stay in the pond, where they've forced out all of the native life forms. This, we feel, is selfish, but necessary. A turtle eating a water plant is sheer torture."

"So the special beings are in the pond," King said. He was amazed by the clarity of her account and astounded by the grandness of her delusion. He was secretly pleased by the uniqueness of her madness.

"They didn't want me to tell you. They've killed in the past to keep their secret."

"And to stop the pain?"

"Yes."

"But if there is an alien intelligence living in the pond, why not make itself known, since it has you as a spokesman?"

She laughed. "Are you saying, Dr. King, that you believe me?"

He had to laugh with her. "I see your point."

"There is the problem of communication. It is largely a one-way thing, more an influence than something expressed. They can make themselves known to me—"

"Just to you?"

"To a chosen female of any species." She paused. She was past the point of no return. "And, in special cases, to certain others. There was my cat Satan. Before he came to me someone had demonized him. He was a neuter, a nothing. They reached Satan and used him to keep me from killing myself."

"I would not lose much, at my age, by being a eunuch," King said with a crooked smile. "Would you like to try?" He realized quickly that his attempt at levity had fallen short. "So they speak to [illegible]"

"Their influence must know the core of themselves, they sense. In return, they receive mainly emotions, strong emotions. They recognize intent, intent to do harm or to do good."

"An ability and talent shared by plants in general?"

"To a limited extent."

"And they can control your actions?"

"Not control," she said. "They can only show, share, and appeal. That, of course, is a strong influence, for it is very dramatic to be able to share the death of a thousand living beings. Who would be unaffected? Who would not respond?"

"As you have responded?" King asked.

"Yes."

"May I ask why you're telling me this now?"

"I need time," she said, turning from her cooking to look at him. "Soon the deaths will end, at least for now. Then we'll have peace again. We've known this all along. We know we should not act, call attention to ourselves, but the pain, in such masses, such waves, is maddening, unbearable. We've been forced to do things—"

He broke the silence which followed. "Such as the intimate activities with the young boys? Let me see if I understand. Sex is a vividly strong emotion. You share that emotion with those who feel the pain, thus blanking out the pain for a moment."

"Yes."

He phrased his next question carefully. "When Evelyn Rogers was alive the island was being timbered. Trees, from what you've told me, there was pain as the trees were cut. Was she helping them, the ones in the pond by engaging in sex acts? Was she extracting a measure of revenge when she killed the loggers?"

"She had to. Can't you see? There was no other way. You can't just do nothing when mass murder is being performed. You have to do something."

"I must ask this, Gwen," he said. "Have you done anything other than engage in sex to help them?"

She turned to look at him. She smiled. "Do I look like a killer?"

He had to admit she did not. At the moment she looked like a typical young housewife busy with her

meal. She looked attractive, neat, and charming. But then so had Evelyn Rogers.

"That must not happen, Gwen."

She turned away.

"Will you come to my office regularly until the, ah, pain is over?"

"Is that the deal?" she asked.

"Call it that if you like," he said. "I'd prefer you call it concern for you."

"All right."

He hesitated, but curiosity was hot in him. "Would it be possible for me to have a sample of the plants of the p... the plants which are immobilized by this agent in the f...?"

She turned to look at him with unblinking eyes. "If you should try to disturb them I'd have to kill you."

King felt his chest tighten, but the entry of George precluded an immediate answer or further questioning.

18

"Hey, we're going to be notorious," George said, after greeting Dr. King. King had no way of knowing that George's next statement was, for the good doctor, a death sentence. "Some kids found a body up by the canal cut today."

King looked quickly toward Gwen, his mind rebelling at the thought. She showed only proper interest.

It was the young kid who had wanted to earn an extra dollar by working overtime. She'd killed him badly. He was still alive when she had tumbled him into the hole and, in his terminal agony, his movements had disturbed the thin layer of sand and leaves atop him. The diggings of small, carrion-eating animals had further uncovered him. The stench, thus freed of the covering earth, had led Gwen's two late afternoon playmates, the brothers Don and Tommy Promer, to the sunken hole. The sight of the kid's rotting skull, gnawed by rodents, mutilated by the shotgun blast, had an effect on the boys which would not fade quickly.

And it was not 1937. The kid was not Negro. When Don and Tommy reported their find, after a breathless race to the island police station, things began to move rapidly. Even as Gwen Ferrier prepared club steaks, rare, topped with native mushrooms, the search was still going on up in the woods. Before Dr. Irving King died there would be other grisly discoveries, but he would not know.

She was calm. She knew what she had to do. It was relatively simple. While George and Dr. King sat in the

big room with cigars and a pre-dinner drink she slipped out the back door and walked to the edge of a rarely used plucked the poison mushrooms and spiced the steak with them

Mushroom poisoning can vary with the individual Some of the more deadly varieties, such as the most virulent destroying angel, are fatal in about fifty percent of reported cases Other varieties can produce anything from death to mild stomach upset Gwen had access to the deadly and a close at hand It had the advantage over the more deadly species Its effects were almost immediate

She served a nice little Spanish wine with the steaks George wanted to talk about the disposal of the dead poisoned body She forbade it "Honey," she protested, I want to enjoy my dinner"

She made her announcement toward the end of the meal after George had hastily demolished his food Dr King was eating slowly savoring the meal Each with the plentiful supply of mushrooms on his plate Dr King thinks I should go to the police"

"Why," George said "he's the doctor"

It was a pleasant meal She was for a change ravenous She had eaten her steak and salad over most of the baked potato They talked about the performance of the flivver over an after-dinner glass of wine Dr King began to show signs of fatigue as well as the effects of the

"Something wrong here" George asked

"No no not at all" King said, wiping his eyes, his glasses held in his hand

"I've been thinking" George said "It's a long drive back to Port City and we've got an extra bed"

"Very kind of you" King said shaking his head "I suppose it's just the excitement of the trip"

"Come in the living room and sit down" Gwen said, rising.

"Yes yes" He stumbled as he rose, and caught himself on the edge of the table "Perhaps because the food was delicious, I overdid it a bit"

Gwen took his arm and guided him to a comfortable

chair. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, I'm sure I'll be all right in a moment."

George looked at Gwen with a raised eyebrow. "I seem to be having trouble with my eyes," King said in a matter-of-fact voice. George, feeling helpless, bent and looked into King's eyes. Gwen did not have to bend to see that his pupils were dilated.

"Would you like to lie down?" she asked.

"Yes, I think so."

Together they helped him to the guest bedroom. He lay down after Gwen removed his jacket and loosened his tie. He began to take his own pulse. "Hummm," he said. "I wonder, George, if you'd go out and get my bag. You'd find it in the trunk of the car."

"Sure," George said. When he came back, King was breathing rapidly and rubbing his eyes. "Here we go, doc," he said.

"I'm afraid I can't see too well," King said. "But there's a small bottle with small blue pills in the side pocket." Gwen brought water. King was twitching as if in excitement, his pupils huge. "Don't let me worry you," he said. "Please go ahead and relax. It's just the stomach of an old man protesting too many good things."

"You're sure you're all right?" George said. "I can call Dr. Braws."

"No, no," King said. "No need for that."

"You go ahead, George," Gwen said. "I'll stay with him."

"Well, O.K.," George said, feeling uncomfortable and unable to help.

She closed the door behind him and sat beside the bed, her hands folded. King muttered to himself. "Agitation, spells of near blindness, rapid pulse."

"You'd be all right," Gwen said.

"Drug," he muttered, trying to sit up. "A drug."

"No," she said, leaping up to push him back. "Just lie still."

The hallucinations began shortly. She could hear George making himself useful, clinking plates as he loaded the

dishwasher. The sound came to her dimly, backgrounded, eternally, by the distant roar of the heavy equipment.

"Ruth," King said, looking at her with wide eyes. "You're so beautiful, Ruth."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Your left breast is larger than the right," he said, reaching. She did not move as his hand smoothed her knit blouse, cupped. "Such lovely breasts, Ruth."

"Yes," she whispered.

"May I see them?"

"Yes." She lifted her blouse. As usual, she was bare. She sat on the side of the bed, letting his hand fondle her.

"Isn't it beautiful?" he asked, removing his hand, pointing. "Can you imagine it, Ruth, as it was, with people, alive, complete?"

"Yes," she said.

"Perhaps sacrificed it be, and it is," he said, his eyes looking into a distance. "For us, Ruth. Once it bore Athena in gold and ivory. See it?"

"I see it," she said.

"And the strong Greek boys to carry us," he said. "We can soar, Ruth. Soar! Come with me."

"Yes, I will come," she said, pulling her blouse down to cover her nakedness.

He extended his arms. "Come," he said, his eyes wide and unseeing. His arms were repulsive.

She went into his arms, averting her gaze over his face and putting her weight on him. She felt his old arms around her weak. He hugged only briefly. She pressed her cheek against the pulsating full length of him, and, feeling the last spasms of his lungs.

"George," she said, aghast, tears on her cheeks. "He—he just stopped breathing."

19

In one respect, at least Ocean County had not changed since 1937. Good people did not automatically suspect other good people of murder. Not only did those good people, among them Dr. Peter Brass, not suspect, but the possibility did not even enter their minds. Therefore, no autopsy was performed on the remains of Dr. Irving King, late of Port City, the psychiatrist who came to dinner and stayed to die.

Good people said: "How terrible it must have been for that nice young couple."

Ruth Henley sat at King's desk and wept. Her aged shoulders heaved for a few moments, and her faded eyes bled tears uncolored by mascara. Then she rose and began the task of destroying the doctor's files. If in the process of sorting and packing for the incinerator thirty-five years of a man's work, she felt that she was also preparing to burn away that many years of her own life, she gave no outward sign. It was only when she found a copy of the doctor's will in his desk, with a short note attached, that she wept again. By that time the workmen had taken the records had gone. "He must have left to Greece." The contents of the will made it plain.

The funeral was attended by a large mass of people among them the nice young couple in whose home the doctor had suffered his fatal cardiac seizure. Gwen cried. George wiped his eyes.

Then it was over.

There was only the daily mutter of the heavy equip-

ment, the hooting of the dredge airhorns. There were only the few more weeks of pain to endure, and then, and then. . . .

And then Cowboy Gore, old, equipped with the mind of a boy, attracted by the search activity which had turned up two bodies in one hole, stumbled upon the shallow water. Cowboy's memory was a clouded uncertainty, but there were things which were strong. She was one of those things. He stood watching. She was dressed in one of those tiny bathing suits and it made Cowboy's old body seem young again, and he whistled. It was automatic, that whistle. It was a one-toned blast of sound which came from between his teeth and rang out over the pond to turn Gwen's head and to attract the attention of George, reading on the back porch. Gwen looked, saw the hat, the old face, and was puzzled. She had told them, all of them, never, never to come to the house on the weekend. But then she was relieved, because she didn't know the man who stood on the other side of the pond. He whistled again and waved. She turned and looked up at George.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said.

George put down his book and came down the stairs. When Cowboy saw him he heard it crashing through the brush with all the grace and quietness of a stampeeded elephant. George laughed. "Jesus, am I that frightening?"

"You don't scare me at all," Gwen said.

"I've been meaning to do something about that," George said.

She held her breath. What did he mean?

"I saw tracks over there the other day." He grinned. "I'm afraid, my shy and bashful wife, that our open-air exhibitions may have had, at one time or more, an audience."

"Oh, no," she gasped.

It was a torrid and humid August afternoon, but he'd been putting on weight lately. He went in, dressed for

the job in boots and work clothes, came out equipped with ax, saw, and determination.

"Don't, George," she said, following him toward the far side of the pond. "I like it that way. It's so natural."

"I'll just clear away the close stuff, right next to the pond. Then the little bastards won't have a place to hide."

"George, please don't?" He looked at her, concerned by the pleading tone. "Let's just—"

"It needs to be done," he said. "I've been intending to do it."

"George—" What could she say? She couldn't tell him it would hurt. She had already concluded that Dr. King's visit had not been accidental or coincidental. It had followed too closely upon George's last visit to Port City. So he was already half convinced that she needed professional help. To tell him the truth would, she knew, confirm his suspicion.

"I'll need a brush stacker and burner," George said. "Know anyone who's interested in the job?"

"No," she said curtly, leaving him and running toward the house.

He moved to follow, and then decided against it. This nuttiness about plants had to end sometime. Hell, he couldn't even mow the lawn or clear the trees—rather the small oak seedlings which had sprouted in his cleared areas. It was too much. He went to work, taking out his momentary unhappiness on the passive small growth. He had to take breaks frequently until he was soaked, and nature's airconditioning system began functioning, providing cooling as it evaporated. Then it was a rhythmic swing and pull as muscles loosened, and his body found its level. He cleared a ring in which to pile the brush, then worked on the margin of the pond. Gwen did not come out. It soon became a contest of wills. He would work out brush, until she came out. In the end, she won. After two hours of it—hot, tired, sweaty, a huge pile of brush ready for burning, the visible result of his labor, a cleared swath alongside the pond—he stood, bent his aching back

with one hand on his hip, and looked at the lowering sun.

He carried the ax and saw toward the house. The pond was green, clear and cool-looking. He put the ax and saw on the grass, stripped off his sweat-soaked clothing and cooled himself. Refreshed, he sat in the shallow water and bellowed for Gwen. She was still playing coy, refusing to answer, did not show herself. He grinned. He'd show her. He was not going in until she came out.

But it was boring to sit in the shallow water with the pulpy green things wiggling against his legs when he moved. There was another project he'd been neglecting, one which could be accomplished in the cool of the pond. He went to the garage, got hoe and rake and attacked the water plants in his swimming area, cutting them below sand with the hoe and raking them out with the rake. They were tough, surprisingly tough, but he was strong and his energies had been restored. A pile of the green stuff grew rapidly. He hunted for a brief spot. What sand was beginning to show and he would have a nice little beach and a clear bottom as well. Then he looked at the pile of green stuff.

"Jesus Christ," he said under his breath. The stuff was alive. It writhed. It moved. It crawled. He'd never seen anything like it. It acted almost as if it were trying to crawl back to the water, but the heat was killing it. A bucket of green worms, he thought, panicked, turning one of the wriggling pieces with his hoe. The severed parts continued to writhe.

At first she was dreaming. She'd thrown herself across the bed, fallen asleep. Slowly, the waking part of her began to tell of her need for a long, cool, sharp, cutting pain. It was a strange moment with the mass destruction of the marsh and the giant agonies of tortured vegetation. It was then she remembered a price they would have to pay. She was even able to doze through it, wishing to stop but unable to come up with a scheme which would serve to stop him without making him think

she was going crazy. He would tire. He would stop. It wouldn't last for weeks, months, as the huge pain had lasted. It was bearable.

But this. It devastated her; this dream was more horrible, more dreadful, and more painful than anything that had been done to them before. It was the ultimate horror, the nightmare which had been feared for hundreds of thousands of years. It was so terrible she couldn't scream, could only writhe on the bed, a sensitive being in an agony which wouldn't stop, couldn't be conquered, even temporarily, by fainting.

Then it wasn't a dream. It was happening. She tried to scream out, beg it to stop. Her muscles spasmed, drew her into a knot. She fought. "Stop it, stop it," her mind screamed, every cell on fire, every nerve tortured. She struggled to the glass doors leading onto the balcony, saw him working again, kneeling, mumbling, striking at the central sanctuary. "Oh, God, no," she thought, still unable to scream.

Pain jerked her to the bare boards as she struggled onto the balcony and it left her weak. She pushed herself up, held to the railing for support, made it down the stairs, her mouth working, eyes wide, streaming tears, body jerking with the horrible pain.

"No, no, stop." It was soundless. He wouldn't even turn around. She fell and writhed on the grass.

George had lost his awe. Hell, they were just plants. There were millions of them in the pond. What the hell cut out a few? They were eerie things, for sure. He wouldn't have been a bit surprised to find that they had something to do with the complete lack of fish in the pond: no fish, no frogs. If they did, indeed, as he thought, like to keep the water clear, then he'd keep them. He'd rather have a clear, clean swimming pool than a muddy, frog-and-fish pond, but it wouldn't hurt at all to expose more of the sandy sand near the bank. Then maybe Gwen would swim with him.

He was working in calf-deep water, reaching out in front and dragging out weeds towards him, he was getting

ready to turn and stack the cut weeds onto the pile on the bank when the ax blade cut into his leg behind the knee, severing tendons and slicing through the joint to leave his left leg dangling by the tissue surrounding the kneecap. He fell backward with a splash, blood spurting. The second blow severed his right arm at the elbow. There was no pain, only the awareness of a heavy blow, but his eyes saw and knew, and he screamed hoarsely, a sound of ultimate terror, the sound of knowledge. His arm was gone, his leg gushing blood. The irreparable had been done, and he screamed his disbelief.

"Gwen?" he said, his voice trailing into another scream as the ax, bloody sharp and deadly, narrowly missed his left wrist and lopped four fingers off at the second joint.

Then he was clawing for his life, leg damaged, his arm gone, blood darkening the water. Gwen, his Gwen. Her fourth blow was weaker, the pain still there but the initial strength of adrenal action gone. The blow did open the cuff of his good leg and grazed off the bone, but there were other blows as he moved more slowly, his eyes blurring and his life's blood swirling out in arterial gushes into the clear pond.

She continued to chop, breathing in sobbing agony. The strap to her bikini top had broken. The small scrap of material hung from her neck, flapping with her movements. Water and perspiration and blood beaded her lower legs.

When it was over, when she had, with cold, logical reasoning, stopped her hysterical sorrow, she worked steadily. First things first. First all the water plants were carefully placed back in the sand, planted lovingly. Then the pain was eased.

George lay face up in shallow water. And toes up in shallow water. And fingers up in shallow water. And in small bits of finger in shallow water. And it was over. The dark threads of blood released into the greenness were being dissipated and absorbed. To avoid dripping blood, however, she went to the house for large towels. He was

quite heavy. One light tap with the ax on the almost severed leg lightened the load.

She placed him, in some approximation of order, in their bed, and stood looking down at him. "I *am* so damn sorry, darling," she said. His open eyes screamed at her accusingly. She closed them. They didn't want to stay closed.

She checked the pond again and washed the sands of the edge with water cupped into her hands. She stored the ax and saw in the garage. It was rapidly growing late, the sun was almost down. She crawled in the shallow water, moving her hands, stirring the settled blood and swirling it away.

"It's time, isn't it?" she asked, standing ankle deep in the water, the pulpy, green, replanted things caressing her bare feet and ankles.

She drove the MG into the garage beside the pick-up and closed the door. There was a full five-gallon can of gasoline for the power mower. She struggled into the house with it, doused the living room rug, went into the bedroom, and poured the rest on George. When she threw a match into the living room from the deck, the resultant whoosh singed her hair and pushed her back with a blast of heat.

She stood in the water, ankle deep, and watched. When the fire topped out, the ceilings and roof flaming in a towering storm of sparks and flame, she had to go deeper. From there, just her head out of the water, in floating on the clear green, she waved and watched until she heard the vehicles coming up the road.

"Now," she said. "Now."

She submerged, swam underwater deep, deeper to the center of the pond, lungs beginning to ache, stars exploding before her open eyes. There was no light, but the darkness was friendly, familiar. In the deepest part she reached down, found them, clasped them in her hands and pulled herself down among them. Her body was buoyant and wanted to rise, but she clung, worked her arms, her feet, her legs down among the tangled, pulpy

cool water plants. They caressed her cheeks. They soothed her body. She was still wearing the bikini bottom in place, halter loose. "Now," she thought, and it was so beautiful that she wanted to cry. She exhaled. Bubbles erupted at the surface, unseen. She inhaled. Her body, no longer made light by the air it contained, settled slowly into the soft, thick growth.

"Why," she thought, "it's like going to sleep."

20

"What you got here," the real estate man said, "is your own little island. One road in. The canal cutting you off from the rest. Big high fence along the canal so that no one can get in without coming up the road. Ideal for privacy."

"Mighty poor soil," sighed the prospective buyer, his hand full of sand. He let it trickle slowly through his fingers. "I'd have to have it tested."

"Frankly," said the real estate man, "I don't know what kind of soil you need to grow grapes, but I know this. There isn't another piece of land this size for sale in the whole county, and if it weren't for the power company canal, this piece would be prime residential property and you couldn't touch it for twice the price. Hell, you couldn't touch it for four times the price. Then, too, you've got this situation. The fellow owned it had no close relatives, just a cousin or something out in California, some kind of hippy interested in the quick buck. You put it off too long and he might decide to come out here and look at it and go up on the price."

"I'd have to have the soil checked," the prospective buyer said. "And then I'd have to figure the cost of clearing it. I'd need about all of it cleared, at least the central hundred acres."

"No sweat there," the real estate man said, looking over his shoulder to see where the woman had wandered off to. He didn't want her over by the pond. The boat was taking the burned house site, but it was still raw and

rough and there was no use spooking her by reminding her of the ill luck of former owners. Women were spooky enough anyhow. She was moving down toward the creek. "It's just scrub oak and loblolly. Good dozer operator can have a hundred acres whipped out in a week or so."

"Well, it *looks* like good grape soil," the prospective buyer said. He squatted and scooped up sand into a plastic bag. He had it half full when the woman screamed.

"Oh, shit," the real estate man said. "What now?"

He broke into a run and pushed through the growth. The woman was standing against a great oak tree and was cornered by a goddamned alligator, of all things. A frigging alligator. It was just a small alligator, being a North Carolina alligator and not having much warm weather for growing time. But it was a belligerent little bastard and it was advancing with its mouth wide, making a hissing sound.

Last time it had been a goddamned rattlesnake, and it had bit the stupid woman and he'd had to suck blood and venom out after cutting her leg with a pocketknife. Before that a goddamned fox, acting just as crazy as that time with the Ferrier woman and that goddamned possum. What kind of a frigging zoo was this?

He scared the alligator off.

The prospective buyer called the next day. "We've decided that the acreage you were showing us won't do," he said.

"You'll never find anything at such a bargain," the real estate man said.

"Well, we'd have to live there, too, you know. And the little woman didn't take to the place."

"No," the real estate man said. "I didn't think she would."

He hung up, sighing. Two hundred three and a quarter acres of prime development land fouled up by a goddamned radioactive canal, and you couldn't even sell it at giveaway prices for some fool to plant grapes on. But there was one thing. They weren't making any more land. Sooner or later he'd sell it again. Maybe one of the locals

would get over being superstitious and take a flyer. He didn't care who bought it and he didn't care what they did with it. He didn't care how many bodies they'd dug up on it, or how many houses had burned down, or how many people had drowned in the clear pond. They just weren't making any more land, and sooner or later. . . . *Humm, ten percent of—*

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Gwen and George seemed like any other young couple planning their ideal home. After several years of marriage his parents' death in an aircrash had suddenly made them rich—and able to build the house they had always dreamed about.

The house was beautiful, isolated on its island and ringed with forest. And at first only the distant sound of the bulldozers clearing the forest disturbed their peace. But suddenly Gwen, who all her life had been paralysed by a sense of shame, discovered a new sensuality lurking in her unsuspecting body. And soon even George's loving attention was not enough. For as the bulldozers tore into the forest near the house Gwen felt the plants' pain rending her own flesh. And there was only one way to drown the pain...

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